# Post-feminist Impasses in Popular Heroine Television

Alison Horbury

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*University of Melbourne, Australia*

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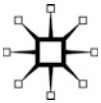

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# List of Abbreviations

**The works of Sigmund Freud**: cited in-text. Arabic numerals following the letters 'SE' refer to the volume number of Freud's *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* translated by Strachey (2001). For example, SE20, 69 refers to page 69 of Volume 20.

**The works of Jacques Lacan**: cited in-text. Roman numerals following the letter 'S' refer to book numbers of Lacan's seminars; the letter 'E' refers to Lacan's *Écrits*; page references are in Arabic numerals (see Bibliography for translations and editions consulted). For example, SVII, 80 refers to page 80 of Lacan's seventh seminar.

**Television episodes**: cited in-text. Arabic numerals following the episode title refer to the season the episode appears in; Arabic numerals following a period refer to the number of the episode within that season. For example, 'These Ties That Bind' (5.8) refers to the eighth episode of season five of the programme under discussion.

# Introduction: Why Persephone?

In the last decade of the twentieth century – a moment controversially identified in the West as being the origins of a 'post' feminist turn – several common themes came to underpin the narratives of popular television heroines, despite differences in the genre and style of each programme. These narratives begin with a motherless heroine who undergoes a symbolic or real death and rebirth, after which she awakens to her position within some kind of underworld. Often this world is influenced by a male figure of immanent power, whose relation to the heroine is framed as paternalistic or avuncular. The heroine's physical body occupies the centre of an impasse over epistemology and representation, resulting in a penetration of her body – a real or symbolic rape – by persons or institutions attempting to map and harness it. There is commonly an imperative to recover a missing mother to the heroine's world because this mother mirrors or twins the heroine: the two must be distinguished to resolve the crisis over the heroine's body. This becomes the site for an investigation into the heroine's 'authentic identity,' resulting in the discovery of a female genealogical line, including a sister whose narrative echoes the heroine's. Consequently, this inquiry takes on the form of an origin myth, a searching for traces of primal scenes in her past to decipher her 'becoming' as a subject.

In this book I argue this common narrative is reminiscent of a mythological figure from ancient Greek culture, the goddess Persephone, whose story is told in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (Foley 1999). This is not to say that the post-feminist heroine perfectly replicates the *Hymn*'s Persephone; the myth's chronology is not repeated in every respect, and not all post-feminist heroines traverse each element of the story. Rather, the Persephone narrative is invoked through the stylistic form of each programme to emphasize different aspects of the ancient myth. Enough

common elements of the story repeat, however, to suggest something culturally significant is taking place in the restaging. Indeed, the most prominent *divergences* of the post-feminist retelling from the Homeric *Hymn* are so consistent they demand critical attention. Accordingly, this book responds to the central question: why is the myth of Persephone being retold in a new historical moment, and what are the significances of the revisions to the myth in this new context?

Persephone is the daughter of Zeus, ruler of Olympus, and Demeter, the grain goddess, from Greek mythology. Known at first as the un-named maiden 'Korê,' Korê/Persephone is picking flowers with a group of young girls when she is abducted, with her father's permission, by Hades, ruler of the underworld and Zeus' brother, whereupon she becomes known as Persephone, Queen of the underworld. Demeter hears Korê cry out as she is carried away and comes looking for her, refusing to let the crops grow until Persephone is returned. Several female characters aid Demeter's grief and mourning, yet Demeter remains 'unmoved' and the land remains barren for twelve months. With no crops, no offerings can be made to the gods, and Zeus calls on Hades to let Persephone return to her mother to resolve the crisis but, because Persephone has eaten of the underworld – pomegranate seeds given to her by Hades – she must spend one third of the year below the earth with Hades, and return in spring to be with her mother, where they become 'twin goddesses' (Neumann 1974).

Sydney Bristow from the action-espionage series *Alias* (2001–6), teen-sleuth Veronica Mars from the cult hit of the same name (2004–7), and the 'dark and twisty' Meredith Grey of the popular medical-melodrama *Grey's Anatomy* (2005c) are lucid examples of heroines whose narratives recall Persephone's story. Each is separated from her mother, transformed through a death and rebirth, and finds she must recover elements of her past to resolve a current crisis over her existence. Yet the plots and framing devices of each are not linked by a common genre; rather, they are unified through the female audience for whom they are produced: they are all industrial products of what Lotz calls 'female-centered drama' (2006b) – television designed to attract female audiences.

A logical beginning might question the significance of the myth itself. The *Hymn to Demeter* has been interpreted as an agricultural myth explaining the seasons (Foley 1999, 98–9) and as a myth of female initiation ripe with sexual symbolism. Korê/Persephone is reaching out to 'pluck' a narcissus flower (indicating sexual maturity) when Hades sweeps her away. The blood-red imagery of the pomegranate implies sexual maturity (menstruation), initiation (blood), and intercourse (seeds taken

inside) (Suter 2005). Alternatively, the myth is thought to dramatize the transition from goddess culture to the 'patriarchal' order of the Olympic pantheon – 'a metaphor for the demotion of the goddess and the usurpation of her powers by the male sky gods of patriarchy' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 145). In this interpretation, Korê is abducted and raped – becomes an object of exchange between father and uncle – and there is nothing she or her powerful goddess mother can do about it. Debate over the myth's meaning has thus focused on a common problem: correctly identifying the context in which the narrative takes place, patriarchy, or a speculative, earlier goddess culture of which little is known.

The unique narrative style of each programme re-staging the myth draws out these different interpretations. *Alias*' predecessors, *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001) and *Dark Angel* (2000–2), for example, as well as the more recent *Dollhouse* (2009–10), draw out the tropes of abduction, physical and symbolic rape, motherlessness, and the discovery of a sister. Similarly, they all focus on the riddle of the heroine's identity in an underworld realm, producing a crisis over the epistemology of her body. The discovery of a sister who mirrors the heroine's story is notable in many programmes and, following early post-feminist narratives such as *Charmed* (1998–2006), the figures of Nadia in *Alias* and Lexi in *Grey's Anatomy* provide strong examples though, more recently, *Ringer* (2011–12) and *The Lying Game* (2011c) have focused on the discovery of literal twins. The fantastic narrative required to stage the heroine's existence in an underworld is evident, too, in the Sci-Fi Channel's remake of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Tin Man* (2007). The popular theme of motherlessness, coupled with a question over the heroine's authentic identity, is common in young adult genres such as *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–2003) and *Hannah Montana* (2006–11). Comedies such as *Samantha Who?* (2007–9) and the dramedy *Drop Dead Diva* (2009c) have deployed these themes through incredulous plots of amnesia and body/psyche swapping. Such fantastic scenarios push the heroine to investigate the meaning of her body in a particular time and place: specifically, what is described as the neoliberal consumer era of 'postfeminism' (Genz and Brabon 2009; Gill and Scharff 2011). As I detail in Chapter 1, this echoes scholarly views that the meaning of Persephone is determined by the era in which her story is told.

What, then, is the significance of the post-feminist era to the themes of Persephone in this context? Lotz's 'female-centered drama' heralds a genre defined not by textual markers but its 'female audience' – a response to the demand in capitalist markets for women's television (2006b, 7). As 'media targeted to women,' this industrial product creates

a 'narrative environment' that produces 'a multiplicity of stories about women,' including 'empowered and fantastic action heroines,' 'single career women,' 'professionals struggling with family commitments and occupational demands,' and 'characters depicting a more traditional femininity' (Lotz 2006b, 3–7). Lotz's category includes female characters anchoring ensembles as well central protagonists in the heroic sense, and we might extend this definition to what might otherwise be called Female Protagonist *Television*, to include heroines in hybrid genres such as the comedy format of *Samantha Who?* and the dramedy of *Ugly Betty* (2006–10) that also recall elements of Persephone's story. Though, as Brunsdon (1997, 34) observes, the types of textual objects feminist television scholars choose are usually genre-specific (soap opera, sitcoms, or drama), each of these genres are 'addressed to women' and are 'centrally about women.' They may therefore be defined as 'heroine television,' a category not limited to specific genres but stories, as Brunsdon puts it, 'about female characters living their lives' and 'trying to cope' amidst varying factors such as work, love, children, and family (1997, 34).

The Persephone myth is dramatized in this space yet is also visible in many Hollywood film narratives, suggesting the mythic retelling is relevant to a specific era, rather than the format of television. Greven (2008, 2010, 2011) has identified Persephone themes in *Carrie* (1976) and the *Alien* quadrilogy (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997), but Persephone's story is evident in other films such as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996) and the *Kill Bill* series (2003 and 2004). Greven's emphasis on the separation of mother and daughter is prominent in *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), where the interdiction on eating of the underworld is evident in the fantasies of its young Korê heroine. *Volver* (2006) similarly dramatizes Persephone's story as told in the *Hymn to Demeter* and animates elements of the post-feminist revision. The heroine Raimunda is raped by her father while her mother is metaphorically absent; her mother runs away in grief (as Demeter does) and is presumed dead (as in the post-feminist revision), only to return and be aided by a community of women in the restitution of mother and daughter. The repetition of the heroine's narrative in her daughter's life (Raimunda's daughter is nearly raped by her step-father) draws out the figure of an unknown sister: in this instance, the daughter discovers she is her mother's sister (the product of her mother's rape). The image of Persephone and Demeter *before* separation is also present in the musical-comedy *Mamma Mia!* (2008), where the daughter is reluctant to leave her mother.

As with these film examples, female-centred television programmes 'exist and succeed contemporaneously' (Lotz 2006b, 3) rather than

filling a void left by former successes, suggesting they appeal to different niches of the female audience in nuanced ways. Though the Persephone myth is invoked in other spaces, such as literature for women (Hayes 1994b), this book focuses on television, for Persephone's story is so frequently produced there, the medium must play *some* role in its success. The Persephone plot appears in heroine television from the mid-1990s onwards, an era contemporaneous with major shifts in political and social discourses regarding women in the West. Increasingly, these discourses are engaged in a debate over the validity and meaning of the notion that we are beyond or 'post' feminism.

'Post-feminism' entered into popular discourse and the public imagination with some fluidity of meaning during the 1980s and 1990s (Dow 1996), gaining recognition through the synchronic appearance of a new television heroine, Ally McBeal, thought to personify all things post-feminist (Dubrofsky 2002). Notions of 'post-feminism' have shadowed feminism throughout the twentieth century – first appearing in print during the 1920s (Faludi 1991, 70) – and though the term continues to be treated by most feminists with 'properly skeptical distance' (Gamble 2000, 43), it is argued the 'post' indicates one of three responses to second wave feminisms.[1] In terms of cultural and popular usage, the 'post' can designate a *historical* break with the ideas of second wave feminism, as if they had been 'overcome' and replaced with a new set of political, cultural, and social conditions, in addition to an *antithetical* critique of second wave feminisms denoting 'anti' or 'non' feminist positions (Gill 2007, 249). As an epistemological shift, the 'post' indicates feminist thinking 'influenced by post-structuralism, postmodernism and postcolonial theory' (Gill 2007, 249). In the latter, post-feminism is 'the current state of feminist thinking' – the cumulative effect of developments 'in feminist's conceptual and theoretical agenda' (Brooks 1997, 4–7). The exact meaning of post-feminism is perhaps most fervently debated in feminist media studies and cultural criticism, as it is the deployment of the term in the public domain – in feminist cultural commentary or public debate over women in media cultures – where 'post-feminism' is most liberally invoked and least consistently defined. For, as Lotz (2001, 105) points out, many conversations invoking 'post-feminism' do so without necessarily considering the diverse theoretical histories and meanings of both 'feminism' and the function of the 'post' in the academy. I suggest each of the discursive treatments of the 'post' – historical, antithetical, or epistemological response to second wave feminist thought – inform what Gill identifies as the post-feminist 'sensibility' expressed in mediated cultures (2007, 254). Fundamentally,

this sensibility articulates seemingly contradictory categories regarding feminine identity: as, at once, a self-conscious performance, but one constructed upon a presumption of women's 'natural' sexual differences. I take Gill's notion of the post-feminist 'sensibility' expressed in media cultures as the definitive embodiment of post-feminist discourses that inspire what I identify as an impasse in feminist cultural criticism over post-feminist sensibilities – what I call the post-feminist impasse. The evolution of this 'sensibility' in the public imaginary has arguably shadowed development of heroine television, as it is strongly associated with *Ally McBeal*. Surprisingly, the heroine of this programme – Ally – is also caught in a Persephone myth where, in the reunion with daughter, Maddie, she 'resolves' her earlier crises through a fantasy of Persephone returned.

In this, the reproduction of the Persephone myth in post-feminist cultures significantly reworks the Homeric *Hymn* by emphasizing a shift in the protagonist: it is no longer Demeter's response to unfolding events that dominate the drama but, instead, the experience of Korê/Persephone. The most common theme in this reworking is a strong clue to the value of Persephone's story to post-feminist cultures. The absent mother-Demeter haunts the heroine's existence in a manner consistent with what Munford and Waters (2014) describe as the post-feminist 'gothic': the haunting of contemporary culture by the legacy of feminism – frequently produced in the figure of the mother who represents, via her generational relation to post-feminist heroines, an earlier era of feminism. As Henry (2004a) has observed, this 'matraphor' is problematic, and I argue in Chapter 6 this matraphor must become conscious in order to understand that which it stands in for – an unresolved conflict between feminist and post-feminist women informed by the mother-daughter transference. Here, the Persephone myth contributes to current debates about feminism in post-feminist cultures, particularly where these debates are informed by generational tensions between women.

In questioning these debates, however, it becomes apparent that a new approach is called for. As with many feminist media scholars, Lotz argues (2006b, 7) that the 'robust' production of female-centred drama is too polymorphous to be examined through any existing methodological approaches in feminist media theory.[2] The tropes of the Persephone myth articulated across this polymorphous territory nevertheless provide a starting point. As Lavery notes (2006), television studies responds to a 'Quality' programming revival by analysing each text from multiple perspectives – evident in the plethora of multi-authored 'reading

television' books on hit or cult programmes. While some programmes analysed in this book have received fruitful attention with this approach, I depart from this turn to consider what is common *across* genres and audiences. Though Zinder (2007) identified the Persephone narrative in *Alias*, and Greven in horror and suspense-thriller films (2008, 2010, 2011), this book will be the first to comprehensively address the Persephone plot in the television landscape. To do so, I introduce a form of psychoanalytic criticism developed in response to the novel, for much television programming is experienced in similar reading practices associated with the novel (Schwaab 2013, 27). Yet, despite a critical shift in the appreciation of quality television – as worthy of the sort of critical attention befitting 'art' (Jacobs 2014) – few have developed theories to address this mode of *consuming* long-form audio-visual narratives in the novelistic manner.

Psychoanalytic criticism has not been developed with any consistency in feminist cultural criticism – feminist media studies or, moreover, television studies – but this book argues that such an approach offers significant insights into contemporary media culture yet unrealized. Drawing on Foucault, Wallach Scott argues, 'psychoanalysis points us usefully to the unconscious dimensions' of particular discourses as products of the environment in which they are produced (2011, 19). This book applies a psychoanalytic reading practice to the myth of Persephone dramatized in heroine television in the post-feminist era, to propose a central argument: that the myth of Persephone is a symptom of post-feminist discourses: a symptom expressing an impasse over questions of sexual difference or what Lacan calls 'sexuation' (Ragland 2004) that have been otherwise foreclosed in these discourses. I argue this Persephone symptom is a substitute for the impasse – *standing in* where questions of sexuation cannot.

As a popularized term deriving from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, my use of the word 'symptom' is not meant to imply that what is manifesting in the post-feminist Persephone plot should be thought of as pathological. An individual's Persephone symptoms may denote, in Freud's terms, a 'pathological process' or 'disturbance' of libidinal functioning (SE20, 87) within the subject, but I take expressions of the Persephone plot in post-feminist *culture* to follow Freud's definition of the symptom as 'a compromise formation' (SE22, 15–16), a means of expression that 'arises where the word fails, where the circuit of symbolic communication is broken' (Žižek 1992, 424). I argue that the Persephone myth is produced at a particular convergence in debates over women in media cultures – as they are entwined in the narratives of heroine

television – that reach an impasse in the context of post-feminism and are thus sublimated into a narrative structure capable of negotiating this impasse. Consequently, where the Persephone myth articulates these debates, I propose it presents a symptom capable of being analysed, and the work of this book is to show what this Persephone symptom can tell us about contemporary post-feminist culture.

The initial chapters of the book develop the central connection between Persephone and the stage in which she is re-imagined, heroine television in post-feminist cultures, as an impasse in structuralist and poststructuralist understandings of feminine sexuation. Chapter 1 explores the *Hymn to Demeter* and the perceived function of the myth throughout history. To feminists and feminist psychoanalysts the myth is a significant expression of the female triangular situation of Oedipal phases that more completely articulate processes of feminine sexuation. Though recent psychoanalytic work has proposed the story of Electra complements Hendrika Freud's framing of feminine sexuation (see Freud 2010), I follow Kulish and Holtzman's treatment of Persephone (2008) as offering a more open framework through which the expression of *successful* as well as complex processes of sexuation might be dramatized. Approaching the central place of myth to poststructuralist debates, I explore the legacy of myth between Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and Butler to consider what is articulated in the division, for this debate also marks the 'theoretical turn' underpinning post-feminist discourses. Finally, I draw on the work of Suter (2005), who argues the *Hymn to Demeter* is a narrative compromise formation, where the mother-daughter plot is in fact a re-imagining of older mythic materials to 'accommodate' rival goddesses from different cultures and religions. This thesis lays the groundwork for the book's central contention: that the Persephone myth presents a compromise formation or 'solution' to a current impasse – what I show, in Chapter 2, to be an impasse in post-feminist discourses over feminine sexuation.

Chapter 2 maps this 'post-feminist impasse' to establish a link between the themes of Persephone identified in Chapter 1 (feminine identity) to debates over 'the woman' in post-feminist cultures, personified in the heroine Ally McBeal. I argue the triangular network of influence that has formed between critical feminist discourses, public cultural commentary, and the dramatization of women in media texts undermines traditional feminist methods of analysis that, under the influence of poststructuralist feminist thought, look for 'good' feminist heroines and seek to 'liberate' bad ones from patriarchal ideology. Here, in response to recognition of 'post' feminist values in the text – specifically, the

'contradiction' of the heroine's performance of a 'natural' sexual difference – feminist cultural criticisms reach an impasse.

I call this, the post-feminist impasse, and note that, in animating this 'contradiction' regarding feminine sexuation, post-feminist heroines articulate the themes of Persephone's story debated in feminist and psychoanalytic scholarship. From here, Chapter 2 draws on the iconic post-feminist heroine Ally McBeal to show how these Persephone themes effect a narrative symptom analogous to the materialization of the subject's symptom in psychoanalytic discourses: an expression of something that has been foreclosed.

Continuing with *Ally McBeal*, Chapter 3 establishes the new psychoanalytic framework through which I address this symptom in multiple serialized television narratives. In *Ally McBeal*, the Persephone symptom presents a fantasy structure that 'acts out' what is foreclosed, and I turn to psychoanalytic literary studies to rethink the relationship between the textual symptom (Persephone), the producers, and the diverse consumers of this symptom. For Peter Brooks, if 'we constitute ourselves as human subjects in part through our fictions,' then 'the study of human fiction-making and psychic process are convergent activities, and superimposable forms of analysis' (1994, 35–6). I propose that the relationship established is, on a cultural level, analogous to the dynamic in the psychoanalytic clinic, where the analysand presents his or her symptom to the analyst for examination and interpretation, just as the presentation of the Persephone myth in heroine television is interpreted by the decoding practices of individual viewers. The more successful the articulation of the symptom, the more audiences engage with it, creating a positive transference – what Brooks calls the narrative 'transaction' (1985, 216–37).

From here, I take on three post-feminist television heroines – from *Alias*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Grey's Anatomy* – that traverse a rough chronology of post-feminist discourses, to analyse the way the Persephone plot is invoked in different *contexts*, extending our knowledge of the post-feminist impasse and the critical territory over which Persephone's story stands: sexuation.

Popular in its early seasons (Lavery 2007, xv), *Alias* is one of the most thorough and explicit articulations of the Persephone myth of its time. Moreover, *Alias* is modelled on the earlier *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001), a narrative prototype remade in a number of guises, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Dark Angel* (2000–02), *Bionic Woman* (2007), and *Dollhouse* (2009–10), suggesting this plot structure is of particular significance to audiences. Critical attention to *Alias*, as with these

programmes, has engaged with the juxtaposition of the heroine's femininity with her other, 'masculine' qualities, and *Alias* openly troubles such debates in the narrative device of the heroine's spy-masquerade. For *Alias*, however, these masquerades are merely the backdrop to overarching questions regarding the heroine's family romance and the Rambaldi prophesy, effectively placing the heroine's body at the centre of epistemological debates about identity. Chapter 4 thus shows how the Persephone story animates the *epistemological* question of sexuation underpinning the post-feminist impasse. Where the series traverses pre-Oedipal (Imaginary) spaces via the espionage plot turned inwards on the family romance, it articulates processes of identity theorized in psychoanalytic literature as well as feminist interventions into this field, encapsulating the *function* of Persephone as a structure enabling the presentation of unconscious or foreclosed material. In *Alias*, this material is the fantasy of the Real woman's body, a traumatic remainder of feminist debates over 'woman.'

Chapter 5 explores the Persephone plot in the teen noir detective drama *Veronica Mars* where, unlike the other heroines analysed in this book, the Persephone plot stages the perspective of Korê at the scene of her sexual initiation. Though highly praised amongst critics (Berman 2006; Mittell 2006a), the series rated poorly during its three on-air seasons; the passionate viewer response of fans evident in the Kickstarter funded film *Veronica Mars* (2014) nevertheless suggests that the narrative holds significant value to viewers. As Birchall notes (2004), teen narratives present a fantasy of adolescents as articulate 'knowing adults,' making the genre appealing to mature audiences who nostalgically identify with a fantasy of their past, as well as youth identifying with a current fantasy of a more autonomous self (see also, Emmerton 2011). The Persephone plot of self-aware teen protagonist, Veronica, I argue, reveals the limits of feminism as a critical methodology. The scene of her sexual initiation, as with Persephone's in the *Hymn*, is a mystery plot repeated throughout each season, and the heroine's role as detective of her own (and her peers') sexuality replicates feminist interest in Persephone's story. In this allegory, Veronica's sleuthing exposes the moral foreclosure towards pleasure in feminist discourses that assume post-feminist sensibilities are forms of 'false consciousness' akin to feminist readings of Persephone's story as 'rape by patriarchy.' However, just as Suter finds the *Hymn to Demeter* to be an amalgam of two myths, I show that Veronica's investigation into her own Persephone-like initiation reveals 'two stories.' While the first animates feminist readings of Persephone congruent with feminist readings of post-feminist cultures

(as 'patriarchal trickery'), the second – unconscious even to Veronica – is the story of feminine *jouissance*. In this, *Veronica Mars* shows where feminist discourses are at an impasse over sexuality, feminist methods are also impacted.

Chapter 6 takes the most current and commercially successful version of the Persephone symptom in heroine television, the medical-melodrama *Grey's Anatomy*, to explore the Persephone myth within a hybrid form of soap, medical-procedural, and romantic-comedy/drama popular with a broad audience (Arnold 2007; Beail 2009; Hibberd 2006). The mainstream success of this series reveals perhaps the most identifiable articulation of the post-feminist impasse: the historical impasse between generations of women in the allegory of the mother-daughter plot – what Henry calls a 'matraphor' (2004a). Where the heroine, Meredith, and her mother, Ellis, are female surgeons of distinction, they invoke the *pre*-Homeric goddess Persephone brought into conflict with a goddess of rival function and status, Demeter – an allegory analogous to rival generations of feminisms. Accordingly, just as the *Hymn* positions Persephone as Demeter's daughter to 'accommodate' their rivalry (Suter 2005), the Persephone plot in *Grey's Anatomy* offers a means of understanding the historical conflict between feminist and post-feminist women by making this relation analogous to the mother-daughter plot in the family romance. In effect, *Grey's* depicts the feminist/post-feminist encounter as an unresolved Oedipal triangulation where fantasies and misrecognition flourish. As Ellis has Alzheimer's, she is unable to recognize her post-feminist daughter, and the gulf that separates them remains unconscious. Meredith's solution to this impasse nevertheless offers a solution to the impasses of post-feminism: through psychotherapy, she explores what is unconscious in the dynamic with her mother to try and 'change her story' as, I argue, debates about post-feminist discourses must follow.

Each chapter takes up one aspect of the book's original question: what is the significance of Persephone's story to heroine television in the post-feminist era? What is the attraction of this story to such a heterogeneous audience? In what ways is the myth reworked in this new context, and what do these revisions tell us about the function of Persephone's story to post-feminism? I have chosen texts fitting Lotz's categories: 'empowered and fantastic action heroines' (*Alias*), 'single career women' (*Ally McBeal*), 'professionals struggling with family commitments and occupational demands' (*Grey's Anatomy*), as well as a young adult genre (*Veronica Mars*). And though none of these texts are defined by a single genre, each provides a rich, *unique* example of

the Persephone myth, contextualized within the conventions and style of different genres. Regrettably, there is not room for all the heroines articulating Persephone's story, and those chosen are affluent, educated, heterosexual, and white – privileged culturally, if not economically. It is not my intent to position the book as a liberal feminist project by ignoring heroines of colour, working class heroines, or queer heroines, arguably denoting the book's 'liberal' feminist approach. The texts chosen are particularly illustrative of the unfolding discourses of post-feminism in relation to heroine television – where something akin to Gill's post-feminist 'sensibility' is articulated – but I do not approach the analysis from a designated feminist position (liberal or otherwise); to do so would suggest the aim of this book is to promote the validity of one feminist discourse over another, which is not my intention. Rather, *feminism*, and feminist critiques of culture, are objects in my analysis.

The claim drawn out in this book is that the myth of Persephone represents not simply a symptom of unresolved questions regarding sexuation but, in fact, is evidence of a complex: a collection 'of strongly emotional thoughts and interests' that are partially unconscious and in conflict with consciously held beliefs (see Freud SE15, 109). As with the 'symptom,' Laplanche and Pontalis (1988, 72–4) note, the term 'complex' has been generally discarded because of its associations with (and popular misuse as) a term denoting pathology. I use it to describe the particular combination of ideas that come to be expressed and dramatized in the Persephone myth in post-feminist television: specifically, to describe the question of feminine identity. For a 'complex' speaks of a conflict between conscious and unconscious ideas that are connected or aligned and that have 'a great affective force' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 72). By analyzing what is unconscious in this Persephone symptom, then, I ask what post-feminist impasses tell us *about* feminism today.

# 1
# The Myth of Persephone and the *Hymn to Demeter*

The myth of Persephone survives from at least 2000 BC and has informed art and storytelling in literature, poetry, dance, and theatre throughout the centuries (Foley 1999, 151–69). Though myth formed part of Greek theology, it was a religion with no formal 'divine scripture' nor 'priestly class of interpreters' and was instead lived through ritual and mythic storytelling (Foley 1999, 84). Linked to a significant ritual in ancient Greece – the Eleusinian mysteries – the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is an example of the way myths are 'endlessly changed and reimagined for every generation by its artists and poets,' where each successive generation 'is left to fill in what we experience as the gaps and to explain the religious significance of the story in the context of his/her knowledge' (Foley 1999, 84–5). Yet, as the myth appears in a range of cultural and political epochs, its original 'meaning' – intended or otherwise – remains contested. This malleability nevertheless makes it, as Hayes notes, a palimpsest, for each time it is retold it reveals 'vital changes in the relationship between human beings and the natural world, as well as major shifts in the economy of social power over the millennia' (1994a, 2).

I begin this chapter with a close reading of the myth and its symbolism, before showing how the *Hymn to Demeter* has functioned culturally and politically for feminists and feminist psychoanalysts such that the myth appears situated at the fault-line of a poststructuralist debate over the question 'woman.' To feminists the myth articulates discontent towards patriarchy, while also providing the means of *overcoming* this discontent through the distortion of mythic materials to reflect feminist fantasies. Psychoanalytic literature on the myth suggests a similar symptomatic usage, where the myth narrates a particular impasse: this time, the female triangular situation of Oedipal phases. We begin to see here the way that feminist and psychoanalytic discourses on Persephone

replicate structuralist and poststructuralists debates about what of myth depicts the natural world and what is a cultural construction *by* this world. Moreover, the oppositions of these debates are reprised in debates between poststructuralist feminisms and post-feminist discourses on 'woman' (elaborated in Chapter 2). The work of Suter (2005) is significant here, for she argues the mother-daughter plot of the *Hymn* is a re-imagining of older mythic materials to 'accommodate' rival goddesses from different cultures and locations, and thus posits the *Hymn to Demeter* as a *political* compromise formation. I follow Suter's argument by proposing that the Persephone myth in post-feminist television for women animates the confrontation between feminist and post-feminist politics of 'woman,' staging a new compromise formation that expresses a complex formed over questions of feminine sexuation.

## The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

The *Hymn to Demeter*, dated from 650–550 BC (Foley 1999, 29) and written in the Homeric style of epic poetry, is the most detailed and commonly referred to rendering of the Persephone myth in the twentieth century.[1] Much classical scholarship draws from the myth's depiction in archaeological artefacts (Bachofen 1967; Neumann 1974; Zuntz 1971) connected to the Eleusinian Mysteries – considered one of the most influential religious ceremonies in the ancient world (Rohde 1966; Kerényi 1967; Spaeth 1996). And the symbolism of these sources are read in combination with literary sources dating from later periods, notably, 'The Rape of Proserpine' in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 2004, estimated between 2–8 AD), and the 'Hymn to Proserpine' in the Orphic Hymns (Taylor 1787, estimated between third century BC and second century AD). As the most complete version used by feminists and psychoanalysts in the twentieth century, however, I base my discussion on Foley's well-cited translation (1999).[2]

The *Hymn to Demeter* opens on the scene of a nameless girl, Korê, daughter of Zeus and Demeter (or 'Deo,' grain goddess, and Zeus' sister), picking flowers with 'the deep breasted daughters of Ocean' (line 5). Korê is particularly taken with a narcissus flower, a deliberately attractive 'snare' set for her by Hades (also known as Erebos or Aïdōneus – both her mother and father's brother), ruler of the underworld (9), who has 'by Zeus' design' been given permission to take Korê as his consort (9, 30). As Korê reaches out to pluck the flower, the earth opens and Hades 'snatches' her into his chariot, whisking her off to the underworld. Korê calls to her father, and Hekate (goddess of the night,

associated with crossroads) hears her cry, while Helios (the 'all seeing' sun god) witnesses her abduction, and Korê thus becomes known as Persephone, Queen of the underworld.[3] Demeter hears her daughter's cry, and her heart is 'seized' with grief (40). She races to the scene, but no one will tell her where Persephone is, and for nine days and nights she roams the earth looking for her. Eventually Hekate tells Demeter that she heard but did not see the abduction, and the two go to Helios, who tells Demeter that Hades took Persephone to become his consort (see also, lines 9, 30, 79).

Furious, Demeter veils herself, disguising her divine status in the form of a mortal, leaves Olympus, and wanders until she reaches the royal house of Eleusis, Keleos. Demeter is misrecognized by the four daughters of Keleos as an old woman past sexual and reproductive prime (101–2). Demeter introduces herself as 'Doso,' telling them a fictional tale of arriving from Crete after being abducted and raped by pirates, before escaping to Eleusis. The sisters organize that Demeter becomes nurse to their baby brother Demophoön. Demeter follows but remains veiled, silent with grief, and refuses any food or drink. Iambe (sometimes known as Baubo), an old woman of the house, jokes and cheers Demeter.[4] Demophoön flourishes under Demeter's care as she anoints him with ambrosia and buries him in the fire at night to make him immortal. One night Demophoön's mother, Metaneira, spies on Demeter and shrieks to see her baby in the fire. Angered by the interruption to her labour (for as a mortal Demophoön 'cannot escape death' line 262), Demeter reveals herself as the Goddess. She tells the people of Eleusis to build a temple in her honour and teaches them the rituals to perform there. They build the temple, but Demeter is still 'wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter' (304), and 'ordains' that the 'fertile earth' not bring forth any produce (305–9). When brought to Zeus' attention, Zeus sends Iris to tell Demeter to return to Olympus. Demeter is 'unmoved' (324) and for a year will not release the crops from the earth, maintaining she will continue to do so until she has seen her daughter. Finally, Zeus sends Hermes with a message for Hades to let Persephone return to her mother. Hades smiles and agrees, but first informs Persephone of her status as his consort and, as such, that she will 'possess the greatest honors among the gods' (266), and she leaps 'for joy' (371). Hades then informs Persephone that she may return to her mother and 'stealthily' slips a pomegranate seed into her mouth as she is leaving (371–2). Mother and child are blissfully reunited, but Demeter senses foul play, and asks Persephone if she has eaten while in the underworld. Persephone tells her mother – in an elaborate recounting of events – that Hades 'stealthily/put in my mouth'

the pomegranate seed, and 'compelled me against my will and by force to taste it' (411–13). According to Zeus' decree, Persephone must thus stay with Hades for a third of the year, and 'when the earth blooms in spring' will 'rise again' to be with her mother for the other two thirds (401–3). Zeus sends Rheia (Demeter's mother) to inform Demeter, urging her to 'not rage overmuch' (467), and placate her with her choice of honours, entreating her to return to Olympus (461–3) and 'make the grain grow fertile for human kind' again (469).

Though depictions of Korê/Persephone and Demeter shift in different epochs, four themes are commonly read in the symbolism of the myth: agriculture, initiation, the establishment of a meaningful death, and 'the feminine' archetype. The agricultural theme of the myth is clear: Demeter is goddess of the grain and crops. In her grief she refuses to let the earth produce food, and repeats this every year when parted from her daughter, providing a meaningful explanation for the seasons and development of agriculture. Room traces 'Persephone' from the Greek *phero* 'to bring' and *phone* 'to murder' or 'slaughter' (1990, 239). Given her 'contradictory' relation to the themes of death and rebirth (particularly in relation to agriculture), Room suggests that Persephone's name can also be traced in *phero*, 'to bear' – hinting at her role in bearing fruit – and *phao* or *phaino*, 'to shine' or 'show,' in her function of bringing forth agriculture, as the 'fruit-shower' (1990, 239). Equally, Persephone's name has links with *pertho*, and *ephapto*, 'to destroy' and 'to fix' respectively, making her the 'destruction-fixer' (Room 1990, 240).

The agricultural significance of the myth links food with life, acknowledging the importance of death in the renewal of life in the Eleusinian mysteries. The scant information regarding the mysteries suggests that pigs were sacrificed one year during the ritual, and the rotting carcasses brought up the following year to fertilize the crops (Hayes 1994a, 6). When Persephone returns to Hades in the underworld, the crops die and nothing will grow, but with her return in spring, new life is created. Thus, by placing a living thing (Persephone) into the ground, the possibility of renewed life and growth is ensured. Moreover, as Rohde argues (1966, 219), by putting something living in the place of death, death takes on new significance, and the Eleusinian mysteries are thought to signify recognition of life and death as entwined – for though death cannot be avoided (as Demeter's attempt to make Demophoön immortal illustrates), a more meaningful death and afterlife can be imagined by initiates of these mysteries after completing the rituals (Rohde 1966). The *Hymn*, in fact, closes on the scene of Demeter educating the people of Eleusis in the mysteries, where 'blessed is the mortal on earth who

has seen these rites, /but the uninitiate who has no share in them never/ has the same lot once dead in the dreary darkness' (480–2). Indeed, the Eleusinian mysteries show development of a religious practice that honours the psyche ('soul' in Greek) in death, evident in the use of the myth to decorate royal tombs in Vergina and Amphipolis, Greece. Not surprisingly then, Freud links Persephone to the story of Psyche (SE12, 291–301). Psyche is commanded by Aphrodite to go into the underworld and receive a 'beauty box' from Persephone that, for Lacan (SVIII) and Downing (1988, 47), completes Psyche's transition to 'consciousness.' As Downing argues, Psyche's story shares many similarities to Korê's in the transition of a young girl toward a new identity (1988, 49) – a theme prominent in feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, as I will shortly discuss.[5]

The pomegranate, as a symbol of fertility, signifies both human and agricultural reproduction (Suter 2005, 98). Visually, it is connotative of womb, blood and menstruation, symbolizing female sexual maturity and fertility. Korê is literally translated as 'maiden,' and she becomes known as Persephone only once Hades has abducted her, marking her transition from virgin girl to sexually mature woman or wife (Neumann 1974, 308). The myth is thus often presumed to be the story of a young girl's initiation (Shorter 1987), and Persephone's eating of pomegranate seeds specifically interpreted as *sexual* initiation (Kulish and Holtzman 1998; Agha-Jaffar 2002; Suter 2005) – a dual metaphor for agricultural themes of regeneration. Persephone takes the seed inside (underground) so that new life might grow with her return, a theme ritually symbolized in the Eleusinian mysteries (Meyer 1987, 5). And though the mysteries were for male *and* female citizens, many interpretations of the myth strongly identify 'the feminine' archetypal structure – the story of female development and experience – as the most significant underlying theme. Yet, as 'the feminine' is a problematic category, studies of Persephone highlight the contingency of the epistemologies shaping each interpretation.

The feminine theme is evident in the myth's story of mother and daughter: one a revered goddess, one a girl who transitions to the status of goddess by the end of the narrative. Scholars of anthropology, however, suggest the *Hymn to Demeter* depicts a transition from a gynocentric, matriarchal, or matrifocal system of culture, to patriarchal culture (Bachofen 1967; Graves 1948). Pre-Homeric versions of the myth, for example, prioritized the goddesses, while in newer (Hellenic) versions such as the *Hymn*, the narrative depicts 'the displacing of the matriarchal worship of the Great Goddess in ancient Greece by the

patriarchal worship of the Olympian Gods' (Hayes 1994a, 2).[6] That is, in the development of the Hellenic, Homeric version (somewhere between 800–500 BCE), Zeus becomes the figure who organizes the women in the story, permitting Hades to take Korê (Suter 2005, 23). The role of Zeus, in performing the 'function of the father' of separating mother and child, troubles feminist readings, yet, as I will ultimately show, is present as a prominent *question* in the plots of *Alias* and *Grey's Anatomy*.

Traces of earlier goddess worship nevertheless remain in the *Hymn*. For though Demeter and Korê/Persephone are represented as individuals, these figures were originally depicted as different faces of the one goddess, known as the 'triple Goddess' (Kerényi 1958, 230), who embodied different aspects of woman's life: virgin, mother, crone. As Graves argues, the triple Goddess expressed 'three characters' of sky, earth, and underworld; Persephone (as underworld) is responsible for 'Birth, Procreation and Death,' but in all aspects she embodied 'primitive woman – woman the creatress and destructress' (1948, 339). Further, Persephone etymologically appears in earlier myths as 'Pherephassa, Pherephatta and Phersephonia,' suggesting she derives from a hybrid of earlier goddesses (Room 1990, 240), and I would note, here, that where the 'authentic' identity of post-feminist Persephone figures is thought to be similarly located in the past – it pushes the narrative towards an analysis of her genealogy that mirrors this scholarship on Persephone.

The specifically 'feminine' aspect of the myth anticipates more recent debates about the psychology of 'woman.' Archaeological relics suggest Korê's transformation into Persephone is symbolized through the representation of Persephone as her mother's twin (Neumann 1974, 309) such that, for Neumann, the significance of the myth lies not only in cycles of death and rebirth, agricultural fertility, and the seasons but also – particularly when the myth appears in earlier periods – in denoting a sacrifice to 'the Great Goddess as the female self' (1974, 319). For, after 'the reunion of the young Korê turned woman, with Demeter, the Great Mother' one perceives, through the emotional sufferance experienced, the significance of the female self (Neumann 1974, 319). It is only after this process that the woman achieves 'union on a higher plane with the spiritual aspect of the Feminine' (Neumann 1974, 319). Hayes agrees, arguing that prior to the inscription of the myth in the Homeric *Hymn*, 'the maiden was viewed literally as part of the mother, the mother's younger self' (1994a, 8). Subsequently, images of the myth are thought to depict 'the feminine' as 'susceptible to endless renewal' (Neumann 1974, 309), and Jung, accordingly, nominates the myth's specificity as feminine *experience*, where Korê and Demeter are interchangeable

figures of the feminine archetype in different stages of development, 'appear[ing] now as the one, now as the other' (1989, 145). So dominant are the themes of the feminine, Jung argues, it is a story belonging exclusively to women and holds nothing for man: 'Demeter-Korê exists on the plane of the mother-daughter experience, which is alien to man and shuts him out' (1989, 164). Foley observes (1999, 80) that Jung is supported by interpretations identifying the myth's 'privileging' of female relationships and experience of 'the divine mother and daughter' but nonetheless maintains the significance of Zeus, Hades, Helios, and Hermes in both instigating action and bringing about resolution to the events in the *Hymn*, if not in all versions.

## Feminist interpretations

The myth has often been retold in Western literature in works identified with a feminist voice, such as Mary Shelley (2004[1820]), who used the myth to narrate her grief over the death of her child. D. H. Lawrence, Margaret Atwood, and Alice Walker have contributed prominent examples during the twentieth century (see Hayes 1994b; Radford 2007), as has Edith Wharton's entire oeuvre (see Donovan 1989; Louis 1999). And, following archaeological theses that the myth depicts a transition into patriarchal cultures, feminist scholars use the myth to make claims about modern notions of patriarchy and its effects on women. Some second wave feminists renounced the myth, for the goddesses presented 'images of women that have supported the feminine mystique by associating femininity with self-renunciating and un-thinking physicality' (Guber 1979, 302). As part of second wave feminism's critique of essential or 'natural' femininity, for instance, de Beauvoir (1997, 173–9) shunned Demeter because she considered her to have already been demoted by the patriarchal system – a figure to be reviled, rather than revered. Others nevertheless sought to 'reclaim the goddess' and feminine experience from pre-patriarchal culture (for example, Irigaray 1994; Rich 1986) – many taking inspiration in personal (Agha-Jaffar 2002), clinical (Carlson 1989, 1997; Wilkinson 1996), pedagogical (Pratt 1994), or occupational (Klein 2014) experiences of rape or maternal loss.

Three feminist approaches emerge: analysis of the myth as it represents women's experience of patriarchy; a recuperative reading of the ancient goddess; or the synthesis – the goddess is reclaimed for lessons on women's contemporary experience of patriarchy. In the first, for example, the theme of abduction is read literally and figuratively as depicting women's rape by a male culture in that Korê is inducted into

a male economy where she becomes wife and mother (Agha-Jaffar 2002; Carlson 1997; Hirsch 1989; Wilkinson 1996). Here, analysis of Korê's abduction draws on modern feminist frameworks of 'consent' where desire and agency are explored as signs of gendered power relations (Agha-Jaffar 2002; Wilkinson 1996). In the second approach, feminists seek to reclaim a utopian notion of the goddess to incorporate aspects of an originary 'feminine' into contemporary culture (Carlson 1989, 1997; Irigaray 1993a, c). In analyzing these responses to the myth, then, we can better understand the structure of feminist thought regarding the subject of 'woman' in the myth, to see where it bears on our analysis of the myth and of 'woman' in post-feminist cultures.

A key distinction to be made is the relation of Persephone and Demeter to patriarchy, or 'the name of the father' – that is, whether these figures are 'feminist' in their resistance to Zeus, or complicit with his law and thus, 'bad' feminists. For Agha-Jaffar, Persephone marks out 'the path of the feminist protagonist' (2002, 52) while Demeter offers lessons to feminists addressing male power (40). Here the myth provides a *description* of patriarchy, 'the story of women's struggle to gain subjectivity and voice in societies dominated by men' (Hayes 1994a, 2); for others, contemporary Persephone heroines awake to discover their 'own complicity' with patriarchy, and thus, '[l]ike Persephone who eats the deathly fruit, these women realize – to their horror – that they have internalized the enemy' (Guber 1979, 312). For Carlson, contemporary women 'live the myth backwards' because they are immersed in patriarchal culture as adolescents, where they are encouraged to identify with male standards of beauty and sexuality: to identify 'with the realm of Hades' (1997, 161). As Gray argues, anyone who overlooks the central 'crime' that inspires Demeter's anger and despair – '*her daughter has been abducted and raped and she cannot find her*' – is disavowing the feminine goddess: they have absorbed the patriarchal codes of the myth and can therefore not critique them (2008, 124; original emphasis). As we shall see in Chapter 2, this reading echoes in feminist responses to post-feminist sensibilities as forms of 'false consciousness' – where, like Persephone, women are thought to have 'internalized' patriarchy.

The 'lessons' the myth offers a contemporary female audience are thus aligned with resistance to patriarchy and, as I will go on to argue, to 'the function of the father' in Oedipal dynamics. Agha-Jaffar argues Demeter's wrath 'brings patriarchy to its knees' but only when directed toward the legitimate source of wrongdoing (2002, 27–9) for Zeus is only persuaded to act after a year without harvest and thus, no offerings to the gods. Similarly, contemporary feminist perspectives read

Persephone as a 'survivor' such that the myth becomes a lesson in overcoming one's victim status. Giunta's explorations of the myth in Italian cultures notes these narratives 'explore the effects of trauma on girls' because they are created from personal experience of violent 'fathers and paternal figures, and the failure of their mothers to protect them' (2004, 778). And Starzecpyzel (1987, 262–3) argues that lesbian survivors of father-incest, though Persephone-like victims, have such a 'unique separateness from the mother' they are in fact 'freer' than most women who never adequately separate. In fact, for many, Persephone conquers her victimization by becoming a goddess, a woman who has (however un/consciously) negotiated a satisfying compromise for herself (Agha-Jaffar, 2002, 55). Subsequently, Persephone's 'powerful' figure succeeds in showing her resourcefulness and victory over patriarchy (Giunta 2004, 776).

Persephone-as-victim readings often remain preoccupied with the terms of Korê/Persephone's consent in ways that evoke contemporary (feminist) epistemologies of rape discourse and parallel feminist concern over young women's consent to the new sexual contract of post-feminist cultures. Irigaray argues, for instance, that in some versions, Korê/Persephone is described as a 'temptress' and blamed for her own downfall (Gray 2008, 123; Irigaray, 1994, 102). By contrast, Daughters' bold retelling of the myth from Hades' perspective articulates the abduction as a necessary 'function of the father' in suggesting Demeter's overprotectiveness restricted her daughter's path to adulthood (1994, 254), a theme voiced in psychoanalytic perspectives.

Deciphering Persephone's degree of consent thus also approaches the possibility of her desire, but the lack of agreement regarding the young girl's sexuality is illustrative of contemporary attitudes toward this paradigm retroactively applied to the myth – a key theme running through *Veronica Mars*. The *Hymn*'s language states that Persephone is 'unwilling' (line 19) and is taken 'against her will' (30, 432); she is reported to have shrieked 'as if she were suffering violence' (68) and becomes Hades' 'reluctant' wife (343). Even so, her willingness to eat the pomegranate seeds in the underworld and the way she lies about this to her mother hints at Persephone's 'desire' for a husband (Suter 2005, 58). Many interpret Persephone's 'plucking' of the narcissus flower as a metaphor for her sexual initiation: the *Hymn* denotes Korê picking flowers in a meadow – as one poised on the threshold of sexual maturity and marriage does according to ancient Greek poetic tradition (Foley 1999, 127; Lincoln 1994, 168). Further, it is clear in the *Hymn* that Zeus permits Hades to take Korê as his consort (9, 79–80), and that Hades knows of Zeus' decree

regarding eating of the underworld (371–4). Though some argue this implies Persephone is acted *upon* – that she has no choice – the *Hymn to Demeter* is told from Demeter's perspective: the narrative is concerned with her grief and distress, her actions after Persephone's abduction, and her means of resolving the trauma. It is, in the end, a hymn *to* Demeter, and we might thus consider how the *Hymn* speaks *to* Demeter, rather than *of* Persephone. Persephone's time in the underworld, moreover, remains under a veil of ambiguity, only described as 'reclining on the bed' with Hades, his 'shy spouse, strongly reluctant/through desire for her mother' (343–4).

Persephone does not die when she enters the underworld, yet her rape is often interpreted as an allegory of psychic penetration, or psychic death. This theme becomes extremely significant in the post-feminist context where many heroines experience the death of their former self via an abduction or rape. Connected to the descent into the underworld, the rape functions as either a death of innocence and girlhood, or as metaphor for psychic trauma. As Agha-Jaffar argues, 'when we undergo an experience that is traumatizing, we cross a psychological threshold and are plummeted into our own underworld. Just as the underworld denotes psychic space, so rape designates a psychological intrusion' (2002, 145). Thus, Korê/Persephone's rape/death is read as transformation (Carlson 1997, 84), one that cannot be undone as it is a 'transformation in consciousness' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 145–6).

Themes of *psychic* death and rebirth are evident in anthropological studies of the myth's relation to the Eleusinian mysteries and offer, I suggest, further clues to the function of the myth in post-feminist cultures, as a process of shedding an old identity for the new. As Carlson notes, the motif of death in Korê/Persephone's image manifests when her female patients transition from an 'old, and in the context of therapy, usually false self and birth into a new and more authentic or true self' (1997, 157). Again, however, Carlson reads this as a *symptom* of women's experience of patriarchy, which can result in women coming to resent their inner Korê and suppressing her (1997, 165). Giunta, by contrast, reads symbolic death as a positive transformation in 'resilience' for Persephone is 'one of the privileged few who can come back from the dead' (2004, 776–82).

Feminists seeking to 'reclaim the goddess' and her pre-patriarchal knowledge in a type of feminine renaissance demonstrate a belief in an authentic female identity belonging to a structuralist era. But with so little evidence, Leeming and Page argue, such quests 'are on dangerous intellectual ground' (1994, 7). Along with Chesler (1974) Rich's

meditation on the 'essential female tragedy' – depicted in the myth – 'the loss of the daughter to the mother' (1986, 237) – has been a seminal in informing feminist thought (see Henry 2000, 2004a; Hirsch 1989; O'Reilly and Abbey 2000), and is an excellent example of the *fantasy* invoked in a reclaiming of the goddess, that we see in *Alias* (Chapter 4). For Rich's work speaks of a feminist trauma in the myth that is covered over with a fantasy (of 'reclaiming' that which is lost); as such, her work exposes preconceptions within the method itself, of elevating *idealized* images of feminine divinities that lack historical accuracy or insight into their original function (Spaeth 1996, xiii). Without differentiating modern from ancient values, feminist interpretations flourish. Indeed, the myth presents a type of crisis in epistemology over how to code the events within – a point echoed in analysis of the sex crimes in *Veronica Mars* (see Chapter 5). Contestation over the myth's meaning becomes embroiled in the larger epistemological debate over 'the woman,' for feminist debates about authentic 'femininity' have, in some part, derived from feminists seeking to reclaim the goddess.

## Psychoanalysis and 'the woman question'

Feminist psychoanalysts articulate the value of the Persephone myth to a feminist Imaginary when they use the myth to *stand in* for Oedipus as the structural organization of the child's triangular situation, addressing perceived dominance of masculine values in psychoanalytic theory. In analyzing this field, we can discern the way in which the myth is used to cover over something that has been foreclosed in feminist approaches to the myth: the trauma of separation and confrontation with the Real of sexual difference.

From the anthropological perspective, the myth's 'coming of age' narrative illustrates processes of subjectivity for male and female subjects alike (Suter 2005, 24): it dramatizes the shift from a symbiotic relation to the mother – where there is no distinction between subject and object – to the production of the child as a separate self. Persephone only acquires her full identity after the father figure (Zeus) and father substitute (Hades) have broken the mother/child unity (Arthur 1999, 220; Chodorow 1999, 246). In this way, Gray notes, Freudian and Jungian readings interpret Persephone's transition as one 'into the realm of desire and the law of the father' (2008, 125). Fairfield sees the myth in unconscious fantasies of both male and female subject who present as Korês with acute separation anxieties (1994). Alternatively, some scholars suggest the correlation of Demeter's upper world and Persephone's underworld existence

map the coordinates of the psyche and, in contrast to the modern dominance of 'rationality' associated with consciousness, encourages balance and engagement with 'the wealth of the unconscious' (Hayes 1994a, 2–3). In this, for some, the myth promotes a feminine mode being common to melodrama and television soap opera (Nochimson 1992), as we shall see in Chapter 2.

Persephone has become a key figure in debates over femininity in psychoanalytic theory as it intersects with feminist thought. Irigaray, for example, argues the myth's representation of a female divinity must be restored to the western cultural Imaginary to *symbolically* represent relationships and experiences of and between women (1991c, 191–2; 1991b, 199; 1993a) – that is, that the task of feminism should be to re-value feminine sexual difference, rather than eliminate it through the project of 'equality' (1993b, c). Here, Irigaray addresses the thesis that the mother – and the mother's body – must be repressed in order for the subject to come into being (see, also, Kristeva 1981, 1982). The role of 'woman' in Lacan's schema of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary experience is fundamental to the question of sexual difference and the topic at stake for many feminists.[7] Because our experience of reality is only communicable through language, we symbolize Real objects through words or images – that is, as 'concepts' (Themi 2014, 12) that, inevitably, take on Symbolic meanings and Imaginary functions.[8] Though the Real can be *perceived* (traumatically) it cannot be signified without mediation and therefore remains a 'moment of impossibility' (Rose 1992, 31). Thus, while Real genitals mark biological differences – as Lacan puts it '[t]he bodies being (*l'être du corps*) is of course sexed (*sexué*)' (SXX, 6) – during the Oedipal phase the subject must *symbolize* the Real of sexual difference and produce themselves as a Symbolic order identity (masculine/feminine), the process of 'sexuation.'

But for Irigaray, masculine and feminine are not equal signifiers in the Symbolic. Freud's theory of Oedipal processes is seen to privilege the Real male genitals over the woman's by investing them with Symbolic value because sexual difference is produced in response to the presence or *absence* of a Real penis (see Irigaray 1985b, 34–67). As I will discuss further in Chapter 2, Lacan nominates the Symbolic value of the penis in the 'functions of the phallus' (a signifier of the Real) as central to mechanisms of castration and Symbolic order identity; but for Irigaray, this necessitates a foreclosure of the Real female body (and genitals). Consequently, when Freud theorized the murder of the father by the 'primal horde' (SE13, 141), Irigaray argues, he overlooked the 'more archaic murder, that of the mother, necessitated by the establishment

of a certain order of the polis' (1991a, 36). Worship of Persephone and other female divinities could instead, Irigaray argues, promote 'a signifying system based on *representation* and not repression of the mother' (Smart 2000, 387; emphasis added).

Irigaray's desire to symbolize the Real body of the woman – particularly the mother's body – is one of the central paradoxes in post-feminist retellings of the myth, particularly in *Alias* (Chapter 4), where the mother is a central feature of the heroine's Persephone story. In contrast to the *Hymn*, where Demeter is the central protagonist, the absence of the mother is often the catalyst for the post-feminist heroine's narrative, as the mother is often required to respond to the crisis of the heroine's 'authentic' identity. The abundance of motherless heroines in post-feminist television could reflect, as feminists argue, a lack of attention to the mother in psychoanalytic theory (Chodorow 1978; Flax 1980; Irigaray 1991a; Olivier and Craig 1991; Smart 2000; Van Buren 2007; Walsh 1999; Welldon 1988). The subsequent fascination with mothers and mothering in feminist literature (Giorgio 2002; Hirsch 1981, 1989; Kaplan 1986; Rich 1986), the cinematic genres of melodrama (Doane 1991b; Modleski 1982b, 1988; Williams 1984) and popular culture (Kaplan 1992; Rowe Karlyn 2011), however, draw attention to the significance of the mother figure to second wave feminism. The structure of this interest is significant as it effectively shapes much second wave discourses as generational and, thus, is unconsciously expressive of the mother-daughter dynamic in the Imaginary.

Feminist work on the mother – as with Persephone, I argue – can reflect unconscious fantasies that denote a foreclosure of the Real of sexual difference, precisely the point around which many post-feminist retellings of the myth oscillate. As symbiosis with the mother is associated with a pre-Symbolic – that is pre-conscious – existence, the mother and the mother's body are often associated with Lacan's 'unknowable' Real. Yet though the Real cannot be symbolized, proximity to it is often *signified* by anxiety (SX, 158). Where the *function* of 'the name of the Father' (not necessarily the actual father) severs the mother-child symbiosis and allows the child representation in the Symbolic exchange of meaning (Korê becomes Persephone) – what Lacan identifies as the 'quilting point' of experience (SIII, 268) – the father 'mediates' the *imaginary* qualities of mother-child relation in the child's psyche (E, 308–7) acting as a buffer against anxiety. At this point the Real of the body must be symbolized (sexual difference acknowledged) and, in the separation from *existence* in the Real, the partial drives over which the mother ministered (oral, anal, genital) must find objects in the Symbolic (SXI, 168–9). Themi

holds that the divinities of the Greeks were 'sexualized, bodily divinities' with origins in the Real that expressed aspects of the drives (2014, 70), that is, divinities did not emerge from imaginary *ideals*, but from 'inner portions of the real as it shows itself to our dreams and imaginaries' (2014, 82). Here Zeus articulates the Symbolic function of the father for Persephone: he allows her to symbolize sexual difference and find an object (Hades) for the drives while mediating the mother. Indeed, Zeus' function shields us from the traumatic Real of the drives dramatized in Hades' abduction of Persephone. In contrast, Irigaray's use of the myth seeks a feminine Symbolic economy through an *Imaginary* relation to the myth that, Jacobs argues, denotes a nostalgic desire for wholeness with the lost mother and a shift 'back into the imaginary that [Irigaray] is attempting to subvert' (2007, 179–82). Chodorow and Contratto (1989, 79–81) similarly argue second wave feminists such as Rich (1986), deploy *unprocessed* personal fantasies onto the site of mothering in patriarchal cultures, producing two types of mothers: the castrating mother *produced* by patriarchy who sabotages the daughter's adjustment to adulthood; and the weak mother *oppressed* by patriarchy, incapable of giving her daughter the strength to succeed within it (Chodorow and Contratto 1989, 83–96). In this, Rich's work denotes the *idealism* in 'reclaiming the goddess' as if, in overcoming patriarchal conditions, a perfect mother – who can mother perfectly – might exist. As Henry observes (2000; 2004a, 47) this dynamic between generations of feminisms often plays out unconscious conflicts with real mothers and daughters, as explored in Chapter 6.

Rich's work shows us where the myth functions as a (personal) projection of a fantasy (an idealized mother-daughter relation without mediation) and, that which the fantasy seeks to overcome (the 'name of the father' that intervenes into the symbiotic unity of mother and child), that underpins much feminist discourse on the myth. Expressed as the 'essential female tragedy' (1986, 237), Rich puts it that,

> Each daughter, even in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self. (1986, 240)

The implication of Rich's statement, that 'in the millennia before Christ' an authentic feminine subject – untouched by patriarchy – existed, who might be recovered to impart knowledge of 'woman' recurs in

post-feminist restagings of the myth. Certainly, as Qualls-Corbett (1988) and Hillel (1997), argue, religious monotheism erodes the multiple female divinities of Hellenic religion into a 'pathological' split between virgin and whore (particularly evident in the Persephone plot of *Veronica Mars* which links sexual knowledge with sin). Yet Rich seeks the *ideal* of the pre-Homeric version of the myth, before incorporation into the Greek pantheon: a fantasy of unbroken mother-daughter unity the *Hymn* does not provide. What is at stake in Rich's reading of the myth, however romanticized (or unconscious), repeats throughout feminist responses to it: as the dynamics of an unsatisfied Oedipal complex.

The structure of the *Hymn* has informed a variety of psychoanalytic perspectives on the human condition. Where the myth insists on the symbiotic mother/child union being broken by the entrance of a third party (a father, or father substitute), for example, it replicates 'object-relations' theories: the *Hymn* stages the phallus/father/husband rupturing the non-differentiated 'narcissistic' union between mother and child as the signifier of difference (Suter 2005, 52), what Gilligan sees as the 'cycle of human life,' where '[a]ttachment and separation' inform 'the biology of human reproduction and the psychology of human development' (1982, 151). Though Persephone returns to her mother, it is only as a mature woman (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 55).

The myth nevertheless represents a specifically *female* structure of experience. As Arthur (1999, 223) postulates, the myth renders three stages of female psycho-sexual development according to Freud: when the symbiotic union between Demeter and Persephone is broken, Demeter must accept her lack/castration and transition through the key milestones of feminine development. At first, however, she rejects her castration and 'withdraws' from her own identity (the divine realm), accepting her 'inferior' female status by disguising herself as a mortal woman past her sexual prime. That is, Demeter 'retreats from femininity' upon recognition of castration – a fundamental premise of Freudian theory (SE21, 231–2; SE22, 125). Demeter then comes to identify with the fantasy of the phallus ('penis envy') (SE7, 195; SE21, 229–30) by attempting to make Demophoön immortal, until she 'successfully identifies with the mother' in the development of a feminine identity when she returns to Olympus and accepts her mother Rheia's edict to let the crops grow (Arthur 1999, 222–39; see SE22, 128).

Persephone's story, alternatively, presents a structure thought to *supplant* Freud's Oedipal thesis. Suter (2005, 71), argues, for instance, that Persephone is the clinical evidence – the metaphorical 'patient on the couch' – whose story exposes the male structure implied in Freud's

theory of Oedipal development. Greven's work on the myth in film (2008, 2010) draws out this approach, but follows Rich in reading the myth as 'the violent splitting of the mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy' (2008, 1). The most comprehensive presentation of this argument by feminist psychoanalysts, Kulish and Holtzman (1998, 2000, 2003, 2008), proposes that Persephone's story, though similar to Freud's Oedipal theory, provides a more accurate depiction of feminine 'conflicts and desires' during the Oedipal phase and, moreover, animates these conflicts where they arise 'later in grown women' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 33). Here the myth animates 'the themes of separation and rapprochement between mother and daughter;' the 'depiction of a compromise formation in order to resolve conflicts over love, desire, and loyalty toward mother and father;' and the 'clearly female themes of cyclicality, fertility, and pregnancy' (2008, 46–7). Indeed, in addition to staging Oedipal themes they observe the myth's symbolism expresses themes associated with adolescent female development pertaining to menstruation and sexual initiation. Moreover, Kulish and Holtzman avoid idealism and read the *Hymn* as depicting what Themi (2014) follows Lacan in calling 'the Real of the drives' expressed in Greek divinities, evident in the erotic language and motifs of the *Hymn* as a coming of age/initiation story (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 47). The eroticism of the poem is lost in the re-appraisal of events via feminist values of consent and, as I show in *Veronica Mars*, the question of Persephone's 'rape' might be rethought, here, as a critique of feminist discourses that negate the Real of the drives.

Kulish and Holtzman's work illustrates the significance of the Persephone myth as neither prescriptive, nor based in fantasy. The myth articulates the Real of sexual difference encountered during the triangular situation, when the 'function of the father' intervenes into the mother-child symbiosis, 'the pivot which completes, *in both sexes*, the questioning of their sex by the castration complex' (E, 188). While Hendrika Freud (2011) has shown the Electra myth articulates aspects of the 'mother-daughter drama' found in Oedipal phases, it expresses this drama where it is *pathological*: when mothers do not assist the daughters in dethatching from them, or when daughters refuse to give up 'the image of the omnipotent mother, the goddess, or the queen of childhood fantasy' (2011, 2). Following Krausz (1994), Schmidt-Hellerau identifies this theme in the Persephone myth as a form of 'transgenerational *pathological mothering*' (2010, 921; original emphasis), where 'Demeter's refusal to separate from her daughter … prevents Persephone from safely expressing her desire' for a husband (2010, 921). Yet, I suggest, this is not

the lesson of the Persephone myth; rather, it is simply *one* manifestation. For Kulish and Holtzman, the myth offers no definitive expression of the mother-daughter drama but, rather, dramatizes phases in its structure during the Oedipal or 'triangulation' phase and the return to these structures during adolescence. Each mother and daughter responds to the 'conflicts and desires' in the structure according to their own experience; in the context of post-feminism, I argue, Persephone heroines show us where conflicts in female identity processes within public debates about women are located.

## Myth, politics, culture

For psychoanalytic scholars in particular, the turn to Persephone follows a history of looking to myth as the site of an underlying 'truth' in the human condition (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 20) – where, as Arlow puts it, '[i]n the stellar cosmogonies of ancient mythology […] psychoanalysts see writ large, in the heavens, projections of grandiose elaborations of the conflicts of childhood' (1961, 372). Myth therefore becomes a nodal point in debates regarding the qualities of culture and the human condition; where Calasso states '[i]t is naive to pretend to interpret myth, when it is myth itself that is already interpreting us' (2001), he articulates the central binary between a structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to this debate. Both the Persephone myth and Freud's use of Oedipus, for instance, are thought to stage something universal in the development of a gendered identificatory position by placing a taboo on the mother's body. The question, as Calasso's statement suggests, is whether the taboo (and myths that animate it) is a natural element of the human condition (in which case, 'myth is interpreting us'), or created post-hoc, in which case myth *constructs* meaning to make sense of an otherwise anarchic existence. That is, 'we are interpreting myth' as if it told us something natural in the human condition in order *not* to confront the absence of meaning in our existence and cultural organizations. In asking what is natural or cultural in the human condition, myth therefore becomes central to questions regarding sexuality, gender, and identity.

Of all the taboos particular to culture not seen in the animal world, such as those on menstruation, virginity, and eating, the incest taboo is thought to be universal. Lévi-Strauss' studies of the incest taboo (1970) and myth (1979) are central to the human condition because, he argues, the incest taboo is 'the fundamental step, because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture

is established' (1970, 24). That is, the incest taboo is neither natural (part of the animal world from which humans originate) nor purely cultural (a social convention that might be lifted by choice), but a stage in the shift from the animal to a subject of social laws and taboos. Freud's work addresses this paradigm by asking: what of the instincts and drives governing the human animal must be sublimated in order to form stable social bonds and, what can an analysis of laws and taboos introduced to stabilize social relations tell us about the human condition?

What is the function of myth then, in articulating these taboos? The problem emerges of interpretation, as almost any theory might be retroactively identified in a myth's narrative elements (Lévi-Strauss 1979, 208). Freud's version of Oedipus, for example, is considered another version, not an interpretation (Lévi-Strauss 1979, 217); indeed, Lacan came to argue that the Oedipus complex was a *symptom* of Freud's own psychology and thus, Freud's 'dream' (SXVII, 117). To overcome this, Lévi-Strauss applies linguistic theory – the relationship between signs as they constitute elements in a system of symbolic exchange – to deconstruct the mythic elements and isolate their function within the whole. Consequently, Segal argues (1996, xiii), for Lévi-Strauss, 'myth is the expression of the form, or structure,' conveying 'a series of restatements of the relationships among key elements in a myth.' Lévi-Strauss' interest in the incest taboo in *Oedipus Rex* (1979, 216), here, is not in an interpretation of, or the actual content of the myth (a repugnance towards incest) but, in the common themes that occur across all versions of the myth which 'restate' the same question: how is humanity born?

Barthes' extension of Lévi-Strauss towards a poststructuralist interpretation of culture has been influential in analyzing television programming as a form of cultural myth-making. For instance, where myth's 'operational value' for Lévi-Strauss is that 'timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future' (1979, 209), for Barthes, the signs and signifiers making up mythic structures are historically contingent units of meaning exchange, and thus, neither universal nor 'timeless.' Indeed, for Barthes, myths operate 'every-where *sentences are turned, stories are told*' (1977, 168; original emphasis), such that private, political, and commercial communication are 'all utterances which could be brought together under the Lacanian concept of the *imaginary*' – the space in which myths are produced and consumed (Barthes 1977, 168–9; original emphasis). Barthes' work was instrumental to television scholars such as Fiske (1982), Silverstone (1981) and Tulloch (1990), in showing how

both fictional (drama) and nonfictional genres (news) construct narratives that draw on, affirm, and, in some instances, construct myths. By showing how myth operates in contemporary culture, moreover, Barthes demonstrates how, once removed from its context, myth can lose original meanings as signifiers constituting the elements of the myth may no longer resonate with the audience or, alternatively, become overused and depleted of significance (1993, 117–21).

The study of myth links the central elements of this book – the myth of Persephone, television studies, and post-feminism – over the question of feminine identity, particularly where studies of myth parallel psychoanalytic and feminist approaches to the question of feminine identity. Barthes' work on myth as a 'de-politicized' means of communicating ideology shows us this link. For feminist responses to the Persephone myth detailed above might be thought of as analyses concerned with deciphering the ideological structure of the myth – as a patriarchy, or matriarchy ruptured by patriarchy – in order to decipher whether the myth depicts *authentic* feminine development, or feminine development under patriarchal ideology. From a structuralist view, psychoanalytic interpretations of myth show elements of culture as if they were natural, pre-cultural facts ('myth is interpreting us'). If the Persephone myth, for example, stages a scene in which the child (Korê) separates from the mother (Demeter) after the introduction of a third term, the father (Zeus) or father substitute (Hades), then the myth might be seen as legitimizing feminine development along 'natural' heterosexual lines. Equally, poststructuralist thought on myth echoes in feminist responses to debates over feminine identity, for where poststructuralists question apparently 'natural,' 'stable' categories or ideological 'truths' in structuralist work – that is, questions how knowledge is produced – they have strongly informed current feminist thought. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, Butler's poststructuralist critique of the category 'woman' (2008) now stands as 'the current state of feminist thinking' (Brooks 1997, 4–7) to the point that, where the post-feminist 'sensibilities' assume some form of natural sexual difference (notable in post-feminist Persephone stories) it is unequivocally rejected.

Butler's poststructuralist project looks at psychoanalytic approaches to female development as structuralist 'myths' that artificially create and *legitimate* knowledge of 'woman' – a concept that, for Butler, holds no natural qualities but is a (violent) imposition *on* the Real of the body. As with Lévi-Strauss, Butler argues (2000, 19) 'nothing in biology necessitates the incest taboo,' rather, the incest taboo 'is the mechanism

by which biology is transformed into culture' – that is, incest myths legitimize those meanings established to navigate the transition from nature to culture. As I discuss in Chapter 2 (and later Chapter 4), feminists following Butler's poststructuralist framework seek to re-imagine 'woman' in a way that *negates* the Real of sexual difference. Yet the *Hymn* does not negate the Real of sexual difference: rather, it dramatizes a confrontation with it.

Feminist discussions of Persephone rarely begin with a comprehensive analysis of the myth (or the concept *of* myth) but interpret the myth within the realm of contemporary arguments regarding 'woman.' Most are concerned with the depiction of rape and separation of mother and child, identifying 'patriarchy' or the Law of the Father as a negative intrusion to a natural mother-daughter bond. At the very least, I argue, feminist work on the myth denotes a trauma not adequately resolved – for the scholar, or for society.

### The *Hymn to Demeter* in Context

Suter's comparative analysis (2005) of the Homeric *Hymn* – its language, syntax, grammar and use of ancient Greek poetic traditions – and anthropological and archaeological evidence of Demeter and Persephone through history, understands the *function* of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* in its sixth-century BCE context as a religious and political compromise formation. By distinguishing elements of the myth that shift or only appear in the later version of the *Hymn,* Suter argues the *Hymn* is an amalgamation of earlier myths depicting Persephone and Demeter independently of one another. As Suter puts it, 'at some point – our earliest record of it is in Hesiod's *Theogony* – a mythographer altered traditional materials to put Persephone under Demeter's control as her daughter' (2005, 121). Persephone's part of the story, for example, derives from earlier myths of Persephone as 'a Bronze Age goddess of fertility and the Underworld, the goddess of the cycle of seasonal fertility, death and rebirth' (Suter 2005, 121), which focused, Suter notes, on the sexual union between Persephone and Hades, known as the sacred '*hieros gamos* fertility couple' (2005, 19). Notably, Korê's rape exists only in the *Hymn* (Suter 2005, 217), an indication that older materials have been reworked into the 'patriarchal rule of Zeus' that 'frame' events from Zeus' authority and control. In contrast, the *hieros gamos* stages 'the Greek development of the seasonal coupling of an earth goddess and her male consort' (Suter, 2005, 101).

Suter traces Demeter from an earlier Indo-European goddess figure of grain, agriculture, and harvest, where Demeter's province is of

'regulating' the earth's fertility (2005, 115) – '*Demeter*' potentially deriving from linguistic relations to controlling or measuring agriculture that she suggests translates as 'tamed land' (18). Archaeological evidence suggests that Demeter's journey to Eleusis in the *Hymn* depicts an earlier version of Demeter in myth, for Demeter's tale of being captured and raped by pirates in Crete holds little narrative purpose but, rather, is an attempt on behalf of the poet to have Demeter and her religion incorporated into the new land (Suter 2005, 147). As such, the poet 'wants his audience to accept Demeter into their homes, as the daughters of Keleos do' so as to 'assert a new provenance for Demeter' (Suter 2005, 148). Subsequently, Suter argues (2005, 19–20), the *Hymn to Demeter* develops a new religion, stitching together two independent goddess figures – who have dominion over similar religious territory – into a myth that serves to stabilize political and religious tensions.

Suter does not take a feminist approach – though she advocates further feminist analysis (2005, 21–2) – and affirms many themes found in archaeological and anthropological studies while interpreting them as politically and religiously motivated. For Suter, multiple (and contested) meanings in the myth's themes, structure, and etiology are evidence of the Homeric poet's production of a compromise formation: a narrative that marries pre-existing divinities into a new structure without loss to the significance of either. The *Hymn* transforms rivalry between Persephone and Demeter as goddesses of the earth's fertility, for example, into the tension between mother and daughter when the daughter matures to adulthood (Suter 2005, 133). And when Korê is transformed into goddess, Demeter is compensated with the great honours of the Eleusinian mysteries from which Persephone remains excluded (Suter 2005, 148). I argue the staging of the Persephone myth in post-feminist cultures denotes a similar compromise solution: of dramatizing tensions between feminist and post-feminist positions towards female identity – and feminine sexuation – through the particulars of the myth's narrative structure.

**Persephone in post-feminism: Contemporary revisions**

The retelling of the myth in post-feminist culture notably shifts protagonist, from Demeter to Persephone, where the narrative follows the daughter's reaction to separation from the mother – for the 'modern-day Persephone, [is] a grieving *subject* rather than an *object* of grief' (Giunta 2004, 778; my emphasis). Significantly, in post-feminist retellings, the heroine's mother is either dead or a breach has come between mother and daughter, often framed through the mother's extreme focus on

career and thus, tangentially, feminism. The mother's death or abandonment of the family home often takes place in the heroine's early childhood or adolescence, yet her memory promises unity and wholeness in much the same way as some feminists long to reintroduce the mother goddess or feminine archetype into a contemporary cultural imaginary.

Another consistent revision in the post-feminist context is one not directly staged in the *Hymn* – the discovery of a sister formerly unknown to the heroine – pivotal to the plots of *Charmed, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Alias, Veronica Mars* and *Grey's Anatomy* (and recent twin plots *Ringer* and *The Lying Game*). The figure of the sister is invoked in *Ally McBeal* through Ally's protégé Jenny, who echoes Ally's story, and metaphoric sisters are significant in *Dark Angel* and *Dollhouse*; indeed, so common is this theme one must ask what it offers the heroine's narrative. The genealogy of women in the heroine's maternal history could invoke aspects of the *Hymn*, where both Persephone and Demeter encounter female helpers such as the four daughters of Keleos and the old woman of the house Iambe (lines 200–5). Similarly, Iris retrieves Demeter from her continued mourning and returns her to Olympus (316–24), and Demeter's mother Rheia is the agent of the myth's final resolution, encouraging Demeter to let the crops grow again (459–70). Hekate also helps Demeter early on (24–5) and, notably, is pictured in the final scenes of the *Hymn* with the reunited mother and daughter: 'Hekate of the delicate veil drew near them/and often caressed the holy daughter of Demeter;/from that time this lady served as her chief attendant' (438–40). Equally, as Suter notes (2005), many iterations of each goddess exist in Hellenic and surrounding religions such that these sister figures resemble the multiple ways Persephone's story is re-told.

There is little articulation of sister figures in the dynamic of female identity – in either psychoanalytic or feminist contexts (or indeed, in analysis of television heroines) – despite the use of the sister trope within feminist discourses and activism. Yet Downing observes sisters feature in literature, myth, and fable, so much that '[s]isterhood and storytelling seems to be closely intertwined' (1988, 167), and emphasizes the narrative *function* of the sister is to represent 'likeness that encompasses difference' (161) – an image of feminine identity that brings the *unique* qualities of the heroine into relief. Critically, the sister provides a specifically feminine Other for the heroine to orient herself in relation to, but one who is *not* the mother and, thus, is an image of self 'based neither on fusion or identity' (Downing 1988, 161).

As the breach between mother and daughter in the post-feminist re-staging of the myth is often fraught with ambivalence, the discovery of the sister can provide relief to the impasse. Indeed, Hirsch suggests the sister provides a 'feminist family romance' where mutual sister mothering replaces the mother altogether (1989). That is, the feminist family romance with the sister negates fears and fantasies associated with the Imaginary mother, for 'sisters are better mothers, providing more nurturance and greater encouragement of autonomy' (Hirsch 1989, 164). Yet the sister's narrative frequently repeats the heroine's in significant ways: it presents what I am calling the 'narrative symptom' of the Persephone plot. As I detail further in Chapter 3, I follow Brooks in suggesting that this symptom repeats as a form of 'working through' 'in an attempt to gain knowledge and understanding of the relations of origins to desire' (1994, 6). That is, the sister's Persephone narrative takes on 'a form of remembering, brought into play when recollection properly speaking is blocked by resistance' (Brooks 1985, 98–9).

The work of this book is not to identify an authentic version of the Persephone myth but, rather, to understand the function of the narrative to post-feminist culture. But analysis of myth, as Rubey argues (1988, 67), is illuminating of subjective and ideological positions of the researcher and the culture in which analysis is staged. The nodal points scholarship on the myth oscillate around – the question of Persephone's consent, agency, and desire in her initiation/rape, the role of the paternal function in the structure of feminine development, and the mother's impact on her daughter's experience – show us this, by exposing a type of crisis over epistemology, over how to read the story of female experience, development, and identity.

It is the palimpsest qualities of the Persephone myth that draw it into debates over feminine identity: the myth's structure provides a set of dynamics associated with female development, but retains enough plasticity in the details of the story – or *lack* of details – that the myth neither prescribes nor privileges one expression of the mother-daughter drama over another. Instead, the myth presents a template of themes and structures to be filled out with contemporary ideas about women in particular contexts. In narrating the 'shared beliefs and conflicts, both conscious and unconscious' of the woman in culture (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 19–20), the myth is plastic enough to articulate, as Suter demonstrates, the shifting politics of authority and power. What distinguishes the post-feminist image of Persephone, then, is the specific stage on which the phenomenon plays out: the industrial product of female-centred

heroine television. This new *mise en scéne* of the Persephone plot has historically opined feminist ideas, debates, and anxieties in the plots and dramas of women across a range of genres. Currently, I argue, it is also the site of a significant impasse in feminist thought regarding questions of sexual difference. I turn now to articulate this impasse, where I suggest the significance of Persephone's story is precisely that of a dramatizing the content of this impasse where it is effaced.

# 2
# Persephone in Heroine Television: The Post-feminist Impasse

If the Persephone myth is invoked in debates over feminine identity, then the retelling of her story in heroine television fits with traditional preoccupations of this space, for, as Brunsdon argues, even if not self-consciously occupied with 'addressing feminism,' heroine television concerns itself with 'addressing the agenda that feminism has made public' (1997, 34). Yet, with the emergence of 'post' feminist ideas in the seminal dramedy *Ally McBeal*, heroine television begins to express not simply what *feminism* has made public about women, but ideas *about* feminism within this public discourse. *Ally* thus denotes a significant shift in the network of influence between critical feminist discourse, public cultural commentary, and the dramatization of women in media texts – one that produces an impasse in traditional feminist methods of analysing women in media texts. This chapter demonstrates how this shift exposes the limits of feminist cultural criticism applied to representations of women in media when those representations articulate a critique of the feminist ideas upon which feminist cultural criticism operates.

Public debate over *Ally McBeal*'s articulation of a new 'post-feminist' discourse peaked with the inclusion of the actress playing Ally, Calista Flockhart, in a canonical timeline of American feminists on the cover of *Time Magazine* with the tagline 'Is Feminism Dead?' (Bellafante 1998), demonstrating how, as Dow puts it, television programming 'contributes' to the 'cultural conversation about feminism' (1996, xiv). Openly questioning whether she identified as a feminist, Ally's articulation of a post-feminist sensibility inspired a wealth of new television heroines and subsequent feminist work that, for the most, remains steadfast in holding feminism's 'authenticity' against the illegitimacy of post-feminist 'fictions' (Whelehan 2014, xii). The majority of feminist criticism

remains foreclosed to the post-feminist pronunciation that feminism, as recognized in the latter half of the twentieth century, is no longer operative in the text under consideration (or at least, no longer operative in the same manner), and this *negation* of post-feminist ideas produces a deadlock, what I call 'the post-feminist impasse.' For where feminist cultural criticism *uses* feminist thought in its analysis of media texts – and is now poststructuralist in that it seeks to dismantle or, at least, understand the ways in which representations of femininity are constructed and legitimated – it excludes any notion of natural sexual difference. The most significant element of Ally's post-feminist sensibility is, however, her engagement with this question, and in this, feminism is confronted with what has been negated in poststructuralist deconstructions of the category 'woman': the Real of sexual difference. Yet, contrarily, much feminist cultural criticism inherently operates upon a notion of natural sexual difference. As Brunsdon notes (1993), 'woman' is a category used as both a *method* of analysis and as the *object* of analysis; consequently, where feminist analysis of heroine television draws on second wave feminist discourses of feminine identity, they replicate feminist approaches to Persephone.

The first section of this chapter explores the traditional 'woman as object' and 'woman as method' forms of analysis, to address the effect of the triangulation of feminisms, television heroines, and public debate over feminisms on this method with the emergence of post-feminist sensibilities in cultural discourses. Scholarship on *Ally McBeal* shows us how, in responding to post-feminist discourses in media texts, traditional feminist critiques reach a significant impasse. I introduce psychoanalytic theory here to open up this impasse and identify a series of themes recurring in feminist responses to post-feminist sensibilities that culminate in a crisis over the image of the woman's body and what it means. In analysing *Ally McBeal* we can see how this crisis denotes a foreclosure toward the Real of sexual difference in feminist discourses. As the Persephone myth is also invoked in feminist debates about sexual difference, I suggest she is a symptom formation in the narrative giving expression to what is foreclosed: 'the woman question' or 'feminist epistemological problem' of feminine identity.

## Heroine television: 'Woman' as object/method

Scholarship taking 'the woman' in heroine television as the object of study has sought to understand how 'feminism,' as it stands for and theorizes an idea of 'female identity' or 'the woman,' filters through and

is reproduced within culture more broadly in much the same way the Persephone myth has been analysed as the site of patriarchal relations for women. Insofar as feminism aligns with the poststructuralist project of identifying the mechanisms by which knowledge is constructed and legitimated (Gamble 2000, 299), much of this scholarship examines the ideological production of feminisms, femininity, and feminine sexuality in the text. Yet effectively, as Cowie notes, this approach often makes an evaluation of the feminism and femininity of the woman as a good or bad object – either a 'progressive' or 'negative' image of the woman in culture (1997, 38). The role of the audience in both producing and subscribing *to* the type of feminism or femininity identified represents another 'woman' object evaluated by this approach. In other words, the 'woman as object' method is poststructuralist in that it asks how 'narrative images' of the woman are 'determining of as well as determined by other discursive practices in the social formation' (Cowie 1997, 39) – that is, how normative ideas of femininity are culturally produced and legitimated.

The above traditions notably mirror feminist interest in the Persephone myth as a repository of feminist 'lessons' dealing with the subordinated status of woman within patriarchy and show, in this parallel, inherent problems with feminist cultural criticism when the method and aim (and the 'feminism' underpinning them) remain undefined. As Boyle puts it, feminist media analysis is organized around 'women (critics) judging women (performers, characters) on behalf of a third group of women (viewers, fans, consumers) who look to the media for suitable role models' (2008, 178). Though feminist projects within different disciplines bring diverse methodologies to their analysis, Maparyan argues (2012, 19) that common to most is a 'liberatory impulse.' That is, feminist criticism seeks to liberate the object of its analysis from a perceived oppression: to show how the feminine object is a construct of the oppressive paradigm – 'patriarchy' – expose the mechanisms of her oppression, and equally, then, 'liberate' the female viewer from the ideology of these constructs. Or, similarly, criticism attempts to identify women objects subverting oppressive mechanisms as 'suitable role models' for female viewer's liberation. Much feminist cultural criticism, for instance, has oriented toward the sitcom, from *I Love Lucy* (1951–7) – arguably a proto-feminist image of female resistance towards dominant societal modes of femininity – through to *Roseanne* (1988–97), one of many 'unruly' women of comedy (Rowe 1995), and now to post-feminist heroines such as Liz Lemon in *30 Rock* (Mizejewski 2012). Studies of *Bewitched* (1964–72), for example, have explored the

tension between emerging feminist discourse and woman's traditional role in patriarchal cultures expressed in the plot (Douglas 1995; Spangler 2003). As I show in this chapter, this 'liberatory' impulse presupposes is that the 'woman object' is oppressed by patriarchy – a supposition that becomes problematic in relation to post-feminist discourses.

The literature on *Ally McBeal* provides an excellent example of the trend in identifying and evaluating feminisms in the text (see Busch 2009; Cohen 2002; Hammers 2005; Hermes 2006; Stetz 1998). Moreover, *Ally* has also been an object of interest from scholars using the 'woman as method' model of inquiry where the series is identified as a 'feminine' text, based on the specifically feminine attributes of 'woman' – the Real body of sexual difference – and subsequent feminine experience. *Ally*'s comic conventions of carnivalesque absurdity and trademark visualizations of the heroine's psychic experience are understood to disrupt classical Aristotelian narrative form – a style associated with the qualities of rationality and 'masculinity' (Nochimson 2000). The 'woman as method' approach is common in genre studies – especially comedy and the sitcom (Rowe 1995) – because the qualities of the female body rupture classical aesthetics of linearity (Russo 1995, 62). Here, Kristeva's work on the physical limits of the subject established in the formation of Symbolic identities (1981, 1982) is used to show how the spectral and physical abundance of the female body – its leaking, fluctuating boundaries, and relation to waste such as menstrual blood and the mother's body – manifests as a disruptive body subverting social and symbolic constraints. Irigaray's model of feminine experience as it relates to the mother's body (1985a, b; 1991a, d), equally, is invoked to analyse the text as an object that is structured by 'feminine' qualities, in much the same way as the Persephone myth has been identified as depicting 'feminine' experience. The editing techniques and camera angles used in melodrama, for example, stage a closeness to the woman that threatens to collapse the subject/object distinction denotative of the mother-daughter relationship (Doane 1987; Gorton 2009, 129; Williams 1984). That is, as Nochimson (1992, 37) puts it, soap opera reflects Persephone's ritual return and 'validates the lack of permanent resolution': like the never-ending dramas of daytime television, Persephone's time with mother undergoes habitual disruption and renewal.

The combination of the two approaches – woman as object *and* method of analysis – is concerned with the way that formal aesthetics of the text inform the representation of the heroine in this text *as* feminine. Studies of women in fantasy, action, and science fiction genres (such as Early and Kennedy 2003; Heinecken 2003; Helford 2000; Inness

1999, 2004; MacRory 1999; Mizejewski 2004; Osgerby and Gough-Yates 2001; White 2007) typically ask: what happens to the representation of gender when a woman occupies the narrative space traditionally filled by male characters? Where these genres are thought to be *aesthetically* structured by masculine linearity, individuality, and express masculine qualities of violence and physical prowess, the question arises: how does 'woman' in this space challenge ideas of femininity? As studies of the female action film ask: what does the juxtaposition of femininity and violence mean?[1] Brunsdon calls this type of work 'textual studies' (1997, 34), a focus on niche texts, genres, heroines, or audiences through a range of theoretical frameworks (for example, Abbott and Brown 2007; Akass and McCabe 2004, 2006; Wilcox and Turnbull 2011). Genre-based collections, similarly, provide a range of feminist perspectives on a group of like-themed television series, movies, or 'type' of heroine (for example, Kaveney 2006). As they are influenced by poststructuralist feminist thought that takes 'gender identity' as socially constructed, these projects focus on the form feminine identity can take given the constraints of the genre – paralleling the question of how the historical context of the *Hymn* determines our interpretation of Persephone's agency, consent, and desire. It is worth noting that though these studies invoke the question of the heroine's sexual difference (in asking how her physicality troubles gender), they do not in the majority presume the heroine to be a psychoanalytic subject, who is a subject of division, and therefore desire. Desire, however, is a critical question in the post-feminist return to questions of sexual difference.

The articulation of post-feminist sensibilities *within* the triangulation of feminist cultural criticism, cultural production, and public debate over heroine television exposes the limitations in the feminist methods outlined above. Two post-feminist heroines, Murphy Brown and Ally McBeal, exemplify this triangulation: they are 'indexical' figures (to borrow from Driscoll 2002, 29) in debates over femininity in the public sphere. The index is both a litmus test and a lightning rod. The heroine draws out a public response, and scholars analyse this public response through a repertoire of feminist frameworks, incorporating their analysis into the construction of a new theory regarding the heroine, text, and feminism. These ideas are incorporated into the narratives of the heroines, and the heroines are discussed in public debate(s) about feminism and femininity as if they were real people and public figures, as the Ally McBeal *Time* cover illustrates (Henry 2004b, 65).[2] But where *Murphy Brown* (1988–98) positioned the 'feminist' heroine Murphy at odds with the 'feminine' concerns of the character Corky, *Ally McBeal* articulated

both qualities in the one character: Ally. A cause célèbre, Ally/Flockhart is for Leavy a 'representative character' in the cultural economy (2006, 19) – a site for the construction of cultural meaning around the politics of gender, sex, and feminism. In the image of feminism as a linear and teleological progression (Gorton 2006, 105), Ally's *Time* cover illustrates Rowe Karlyn's suggestion that if feminism exists anywhere, it exists in popular culture (2011, 7), where, as Mizejewski points out (2012), much feminist scholarship implies that 'feminist texts' should perform the function of feminist work.

Television heroines such as Ally, who increasingly integrate post-feminist discourses into their narratives, trouble the feminist cultural critic and scholar looking for 'good' feminists and poststructuralist articulations of femininity as historically contingent rather than natural. The effect of *Ally*'s success was, as Lotz argues, a 'surplus of female-centered narratives across broadcast, basic and premium cable networks' (2006b, 23); whether it is a direct outcome, this surplus of programming for women certainly *paralleled* the triangulation of feminist cultural criticism, cultural production, and public debate. For many of these narratives began to engage with the feminist demand (as *Ally McBeal* did) that their heroines be 'good' feminists. That is, characters like Ally began to articulate ideas now associated with post-feminist sensibilities (such as ambivalence towards feminism), exposing the limits of feminist methods in both its 'liberatory impulse' and evaluative mode of seeking the 'good' feminist.

## Post-feminism

'Post-feminism' has been invoked and deployed both in and out of the academy, politically, culturally, popularly, and irreverently; as such, the dispute over the meaning of the 'post' amongst feminist cultural critiques – either a historical, epistemological, or antithetical relationship to 'feminism' (Gill 2007, 249) – rarely qualifies which type of *feminism* it prefixes. Yet this 'impassioned debate' (Gamble 2000) is considerably complicated by the variable meaning of 'feminism': 'feminist' or 'feminist discourses' can refer to work of theoreticians and feminist philosophers, fields of criticism (such as feminist media studies, distinct from feminist film theory), commentators in social and political (mediated) public spheres, political activists, or any combination thereof. As Maparyan notes (2012, 21), the division 'between "feminism in the academy" and "feminism in the streets"' is further splintered by global disparities, but even *in* the academy, as Arthurs notes,

interpretation of much feminist theory is coloured by 'furious disagreement' (2004, 130). Difficulties emerge in accurately describing specific theorists *as* feminist; Irigaray and Kristeva, known in the Anglophone world as the 'French Feminists' (Moses 1998; Whitford 1991), are also identified as 'post-feminists' because their work is informed by other 'post' theorists of deconstruction and linguistics such as Derrida (Tong 1992, 217). Their status *as* feminists is contested (Wright 2001, 8) as they oppose the feminist project of 'equality' and, instead, identify primarily as philosophers engaged in the subject of 'woman' (Delphy 2000; Winter 1997).

I want to distinguish how post-feminism has been theoretically interpreted as either a historical, antithetical, or epistemological break with second wave feminism, to show how in different ways each framework contributes to the post-feminist 'sensibility' in media culture and, consequently, disturbs the basic model of feminist criticism outlined above. For Gill (2007, 249), the historical break is evident in feminist commentary on and in the media, where women's everyday experiences are 'characterized by different problems and concerns' to those of earlier feminisms. The antithetical break is somewhat more complex as it is often associated with 'Backlash' feminism, what Faludi (1991) describes as an openly hostile discourse towards second wave feminism that seeks to undermine feminist goals and achievements. The extent to which the antithetical break operates as a radically separate political stance disassociated from earlier feminisms (as Gill suggests), and as that which still operates as a feminist discourse, is unclear, as this typology is frequently associated with a conservative feminist politics, particularly towards gender (Heywood and Drake 1997, 1). Two positions seem to be articulated: those critical of second wave feminism but who continue to identify with 'conservative' feminist politics (what might be called a 'liberal feminist' position), and those actively seeking to detract from feminism claiming no identification with it (for example, the 'Women Against Feminism' Tumblr). I would note, however, that in any of its meanings post-feminism is a descriptive or diagnostic term rather than a position openly identified with. Paglia, for instance, has been called 'post-feminist' for openly criticizing aspects of second wave feminism, yet never claimed to be post-feminist and rejects claims she is 'antifeminist,' arguing, instead, that she is 'a feminist who wants to radically reform current feminism' (Paglia 1992a, 56). As Lotz (2001, 105) observes, these nuances appear to rely on the type of feminism one looks at the phenomenon from. Paglia may or may not be 'antithetical' towards feminism (and thus post-feminist), depending on what

discourse one is referring to: a Marxist, liberal, or radical essentialist project – a theoretical or political framework.

Equally, commentators rarely clarify whether the post-feminist discourse they are discussing is a cultural phenomenon, theoretical discourse, or political movement (Mendes 2011, 550), and it is significant that antithetical and historical breaks are typically interpretations of the way feminist discourses are articulated in public *mediated* cultures – closely related to Gill's fourth category: the post-feminist 'sensibility.' In contrast, epistemological 'post-feminist' discourses are located in the academy, within the theoretical shifts in feminist philosophy better recognized as 'poststructuralist feminism' (Brooks 1997, 21). Equated with a new type of feminism altogether, the epistemological 'post' is often conflated with third wave feminisms – a term that, as with feminism, nominates several agendas. Popular third wave feminist writing and commentary advocating a liberal agenda of personal choice under the rubric 'why suffer?' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, xx), for instance, would seem to be at odds with definitions of third wave as denoting the critical interventions of Black and 'Other' feminisms (Chicana and womanism) and Queer theory challenging the predominantly white, middle class privilege of the second wave (Henry 2004a, 25; Heywood and Drake 1997, 8–13). Yet, both definitions tally with notions of post-feminism: as either a 'liberal' historical shift to an era characterized by different problems (those of the individual, 'why suffer?'); the epistemological shift informed by poststructuralist shifts and queer theory and 'Other' feminism (a new type of feminism); or the 'antithetical' critical intervention into second wave theory by 'Other' feminism or even 'liberal' feminisms. It depends what is meant by 'feminism.' It might be said, equally, that from a Marxist feminist position there is little difference between post-feminism as it invokes a historical shift and the liberal tendencies of some third wave feminisms, as both overlook the material conditions of working women, and those women in non-Western, 'third world' countries (see Sidler 1997). Even so, a similar political critique could be made of post-feminism as it refers to an epistemological shift because, Maparyan argues, these post-feminisms 'reflect the economic privilege of theoretical indulgence available to critical thinkers in economically developed nations' (2012, 20). Critically, while some feminists openly identify as third wave (such as Heywood and Drake), or as poststructuralist feminists (Butler), few feminists identify as 'post-feminist.' In addition, the deadlock between feminist differences denotes a lack of recognition between second wave writers and thinkers and the next generation of women (Henry

2000) – expressed in the lament of many second wave commentators (for instance, Chesler 1998; Greer 1999; Summers 2002). This tradition of misrecognition continues to inform feminist writing, as the mother-daughter relation in *Grey's Anatomy* dramatizes. Meanwhile, for Arthurs (2004, 130), generational conflict between second wave feminists 'structures' the debate over post-feminism. The 'post' in Arthurs' usage (2004, 130), is partially historical as it denotes different generations' interpretations of feminist issues, while this historicism *produces* the effects of an epistemological 'post,' what she calls 'postfeminist revisionism': the 'corrective' reworking of second wave theory by subsequent generations (2004, 130–1).

The epistemological break with feminism is of particular significance because the core theory underpinning feminist cultural criticism (of feminine identity) is problematized in this shift. Poststructuralist or epistemological 'post-feminists,' such as Butler, follow Foucault in locating identity in discursive productions and institutional technologies of knowledge (Grosz 1990, 141), intervening into theories of feminine identity based on natural sexual differences. Critically, Butler articulates the structural foreclosure in feminist theory that follows Rubin (2012[1984]) in 'repudiating' biology – on the presumption that it is 'fixed, static, and analytically useless' (Wilson 2010, 200). In her deconstruction of the category 'woman' – that 'initiates feminist interests' and is the tool with which these interest are pursued (Butler 2008, 2) – Butler 'rejects' a 'conception of gender as a substantial difference expressing an underlying natural sexual division' (Boucher 2008, 129) and anoints it as the site of '*epistemic* departure' (Boucher 2008, 175; my emphasis). As Lauretis puts it, 'the theoretical object or field of knowledge of feminism and the modes of knowing we want to claim as feminist (method, knowledges, or consciousness) are themselves caught in the paradox of woman' (1990, 115). Notwithstanding Butler's 'corporeal turn' or *re*turn to the body in feminist theory – that, as Boucher observes, 'flirts' with the material body only to displace it ontologically as an effect of discourse/power (2008, 155) – her work signals an intervention into the debate over feminine identity and sexual difference between second wave feminism and psychoanalytic theory – into which Persephone is drawn – known as 'the feminist epistemological problem' (Brooks 1997, 29) at the centre of second wave theory.[3] De Beauvoir's thematic '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1997, 295) that inspires much second wave discourse appears to take specific issue with Freud's work on femininity. Yet Freud, though seemingly agreeing that 'woman' is a psychological *consequence* of anatomy rather than the *effect* of anatomy

(SE19, 248–58), nevertheless maintains that anatomy – the Real body of sexual difference – is the base from which psychological processes respond. Where feminists, as Grosz notes (1990, 142), turned to psychoanalysis, it was thus to consider how psychoanalysis described women's oppression (such as Mitchell 1986; 1992), or *pre*scribed it in an oppression of a more 'essential' (authentic) femininity able, like Persephone, to be liberated from patriarchal structures (for instance, Irigaray 1985a, b). Both positions were nonetheless considered structuralist interpretations of identity and were discarded by feminists informed by poststructuralism (Grosz 1990, 141), whose 'liberatory impulse' turned towards the *mechanisms* of institutional knowledge that maintains and represents this 'woman.'

Poststructuralist theory informs feminism's 'liberatory impulse' by effectively disarticulating the means by which feminist criticism analyses its object. For McRobbie (2004), Butler's influence ushers in a new era of scholarship in which feminism is dismantled and subsequently displaced by queer theory and political agendas. Butler's work thus denotes confusion in the term post-feminism: if Butler is post-feminist, it is because she deconstructs the operations of feminism and is at once 'beyond' feminism even as she pursues a feminist project in a new way. Further, though Butler engages with (and is informed by) psychoanalytic thought, her intervention on the topic of woman debated between feminism and psychoanalysis silences psychoanalytic influence in feminist theory, such that now only some queer theory remains engaged with psychoanalytic thought on questions of identity, desire, and pleasure (for example, Bersani 1986; Bersani and Phillips 2008; Dean and Lane 2001). In contrast, feminist responses to post-feminist sensibilities demonstrate that feminism is foreclosed to notions of pleasure (feminine *jouissance*) and desire. Yet desire and feminine *jouissance*, as we shall see in Chapter 5, are central to understanding the feminine position of post-feminist sensibilities, and this foreclosure tells us something important about feminism.

### Post-feminist rhetoric in heroine television

Heroine television has, Brunsdon argues, traditionally voiced what 'feminism has made public' about women's lives (1997, 34), yet though a logical space for the questioning of second wave feminist discourses, the dramatization of post-feminist sensibilities therein shows us where the methods deployed to comprehend heroine television have not similarly transitioned. Where heroine television becomes a spatial and temporal zone in which 'feminism is gone, departed, dead' (Hawkesworth 2004,

969), 'feminism' acquires new meaning. As McRobbie observes (2004, 513), once feminist principles are shown to be incorporated into the social, political, and cultural infrastructure of the community (evident in heroines like Ally), 'feminism' can no longer exist or function as an external critique because the community is now feminist 'in principle, if not in fact.' Consequently, instead of asking 'how do we address and make sense of a post-feminist media culture that repeatedly and loudly insists that feminism is no longer relevant?' (Tasker and Negra 2005, 108), I ask: how can feminism function as a critical discourse – for the purpose of analysing culture – if the object of its attention has absorbed and put into practice its key objectives, if not critically and theoretically 'revised' these ideas?

This is the site of an impasse in feminist cultural criticism, where feminist debate identifies post-feminism as a *symptom* presumed to stand in for something else: feminism's failure, success, evolution, or demise (for example, Busch 2009; Chesler 2005; Hall and Rodriguez 2003; Hammers 2005; Hollows 2006; Shalit 1998; Tasker and Negra 2007; Vavrus 2000). It is an impasse formed through a negation of post-feminist discourses where, just as feminists negate Persephone's desire as 'patriarchal trickery,' Gamble notes that those faithful to 'traditional forms of feminism circle around the neologism [post-feminism] warily, unable to decide whether it represents a con trick engineered by the media' (2000, 43). I use negation here, in the psychoanalytic sense, of something acknowledged – that is, symbolized – but consciously rejected: negated in the gesture 'no' (see Freud, SE19, 236). Few scholars concede any version of it as a legitimate position or are, as Maher states, 'loathe to promote the post-feminist position' (2007, 200), and Gamble observes that where a 'coherent solution cannot be developed' feminist discourses fragment and become deadlocked (2000, 52). Despite a two-decade maturation of post-feminist sensibilities in media cultures that has effectively shaped an entire generation, the negation of post-feminist sensibilities as *false* or *illegitimate* continues, and feminists remain resolved to counter it with 'renewed' vigour (see Thornham and Weissmann 2013).

This negation is the site of the post-feminist impasse as the reception of *Ally McBeal* illustrates. Though *Time* heralded the 'death of feminism' one hundred and nineteen times by 1969 (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 93), the Ally *Time* cover resonated with the crisis of meaning post-feminism inspires (for example, Gorton 2006; Lotz 2006a). Ally's ambivalence towards feminism and (re)adoption of proto-feminist concerns regarding her specifically female or 'feminine' identity (Moseley and Read 2002) denote Gill's post-feminist sensibility in a 'a heady, seductive

brew' (Heywood 1998): she is unapologetically preoccupied with 'feminine' pursuits such as love, 'romance, gossip and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband' (McRobbie 2009, 21); she uses her emotions 'to confront problems in the workplace' (Gorton 2009, 128); and she frequently mirror gazes, obsessing over her bodily attributes as they signify her feminine identity. Ally nevertheless embodies feminist achievements: she is Ivy League educated, employed in what was traditionally a male dominated profession, is financially independent, and enjoys a liberal sexual life. Her openly neurotic behaviour, then, appears to undermine her embodiment of feminist gains, staging a crisis between signifiers of feminism and femininity without comfortable resolution (Moseley and Read 2002, 236–7). Indeed, Ally's image fits Genz's analysis of post-feminist femininity as 'gothic': a spectacle of femininity monstrous in its uncanny evocation of a forgotten-yet-familiar femininity of the past (2007, 69).

Ally articulates a post/feminist rhetoric that announces feminism's success as it moves beyond feminism's collective concerns to the private concerns of the neoliberal citizen, what Genz and Brabon describe as the shift from 'victim feminism' to 'power feminism' (2009, 64). In Gill's terms, then, the series presents a historical shift to an era in which feminism is 'called to account' (McRobbie 2009, 21) in ways that illustrate the triangulation of feminist debates through the narrative of the series. Each episode, for instance, openly questions the gains of feminism by 'present[ing] thesis and antithesis, contradictory arguments over the legal basis of sexual harassment laws and over the political consequences of applying them' (Smith 2007, 177). Indeed, in the tradition of feminist cultural criticism, Ally has been labelled *both* a 'good' and 'bad' feminist (McKenna 2006) who is equally rewarded and punished for these feminisms in the narrative (Hammers 2006). Yet Ally is not a glitch in a stable tradition; rather, she is the prototype for the post-feminist heroines that followed. The response to her image is thus indicative of the impasse in feminist cultural criticism more generally.

What, exactly, of post-feminist sensibilities, is negated or foreclosed in the post-feminist impasse? Munford and Waters suggest that post-feminist media culture is 'haunted by the ghosts of an undead feminism' (2014, 8). Though, like Genz (2007), they recognize the post-feminist sensibility to articulate a femininity belonging to a pre (second wave) feminist era (Munford and Waters 2014, 10); it is not this femininity that haunts, they argue, but *feminism*. I argue, in contrast, that it is the unresolved *questions* of feminism (foreclosed in the epistemological shifts of poststructuralist feminisms) regarding sexual difference in feminine

identity that the post-feminist sensibility articulates: that is, rather than either feminism or femininity 'haunting' post-feminism, post-feminist sensibilities articulate and animate what feminism has foreclosed. At the conscious level, 'feminism' appears to be foreclosed, but I suggest that attention to the broad signifier feminism negates at a meta level what has actually been foreclosed: the Real of sexual difference. Clarification of terms is important here. Freud notes that '[n]egation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed' (SE19, 235). What feminism 'negates' in the post-feminist sensibility is that which has been 'repressed' in feminist discourses but are now expressed in the sensibility: the Real of sexual difference. For though this quality is acknowledged by many feminists to be articulated in post-feminist sensibilities, as Freud puts it, 'the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way to consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*' with the gesture 'no' (SE19, 235) – in other words, 'I see you but only by saying no to you.' 'Foreclosure,' for Lacan, differs from negation in that it indicates a complete repudiation of the thing *prior* to symbolization or recognition, a foreclosure in the 'non-symbolised Real' the result of which is psychosis (SI, 58–9).[4] As a system of thought, feminist discourses theorize what is permissible on the topic 'woman,' and though this discourse has previously engaged with sexual difference, this has been foreclosed from the agenda. The degree to which individuals identifying as feminist negate or foreclose the Real of sexual difference is, I suggest, a separate question; but insofar as it is a signifier 'feminism' nominates a dominant foreclosure (in the general sense) on this issue, in that it makes further engagement with it (symbolization and recognition) impossible.

Ally's dénouement of feminism articulates this particular aspect of Gill's post-feminist sensibility (2007, 254) as organized around the concept of femininity as a bodily property. Promoted in media cultures through the makeover paradigm and an emphasis on self-surveillance, post-feminist sensibilities construct femininity via a repertoire of activities that denote the female subject as agent in the creation of a feminine self (Gill 2007, 255). As a bodily project, the sensibility signals a 'marked sexualisation of culture' that reasserts essential differences between the sexes – differences that ignore race, class, age, disability, and gender (Gill 2007, 255) – hence the conflation of the post-feminist sensibility with 'liberal' feminisms. In this way the revival of feminine masquerade in the sensibility both signifies the 'logic of consumer culture' as much as it does 'femininity' (McRobbie 2009, 54), for post-feminism is 'doubly coded in political terms' – it cannot be separated from the project of identity that is informed by neoliberal attitudes toward consumption

(Genz 2009, 166; Gill and Scharff 2011). Gill observes that, as a signifier of this sensibility the female body operates as a 'window to the individual's interior life' (2007, 256). That is, in post-feminist cultures, the female body is presumed to signify – through a repertoire of external practices and performances – the interior subjectivity of 'woman.'

The qualities of Gill's sensibility are similar to the aesthetic effects of the postmodern 'break,' illustrating the way post-feminist sensibilities are reflective of the (feminist) past via a deliberate rhetorical evocation of feminism. The prevalence of the sensibility in media culture denotes society's familiarity with feminist discourses and debates (McRobbie 2009, 16).[5] 'Sexism' in post-feminist culture is thus read as an ironic self-conscious address to both the era before feminism and the achievements *of* feminism (Gill 2007, 255) – a 'knowing' address where feminism is called forth as a means of signifying feminism's redundancy (McRobbie 2004, 2007a, b, 2009). In a radical left, sociological reworking of Butler, McRobbie views the post-feminist sensibility through a post-Marxist and Foucauldian framework as a 'double entanglement' (2009, 6). Here, women are addressed as privileged subjects of education with seemingly endless choice, freedom, and power, on the condition of accepting a subtle reworking of the old sexual contract (patriarchy) for a new one that disguises the real circumstances of women's continued oppression (McRobbie 2009).

Within the post-feminist sensibility, then, those aspects of feminist theory deemed radical and excessive – requiring substantial reorganization of cultural life – take on the mantle of 'feminism' as distinct from the dominant ideology of the community which is now (at least, in some ways) inherently feminist (McRobbie 2004, 513). As such, 'feminism' becomes understood as a radical position associated with values and ideologies antithetical to contemporary culture and the community. McRobbie notes (2009, 26), for example, that part of the 'disarticulation of feminism' is the 'widespread dissemination of values which typecast feminism' as a radical, politically strident, Marxist, socialist, or lesbian 'Other.' Only a liberal feminist agenda is recognized by the State in its active positioning of women as 'worthy of government attention' that eliminates 'the need for feminist critique' (McRobbie 2009, 57). Where feminism is invoked to critique culture, therefore, it is assumed to be associated with values antithetical to the community. In particular, any association with feminism is imagined to 'rob' young women of a sexual value (McRobbie 2004, 513) such that young women are encouraged to relinquish a feminist critique in order to be recognized as 'sophisticated,' knowing citizens (McRobbie 2009, 18). The ironic, playful

adoption of pre-feminist fashion motifs in the sensibility thus stage a knowing pastiche of femininity as performance and signal participation in the new sexual contract (McRobbie 2009, 67). Within this economy Ally McBeal's 'short skirts' are a loaded signifier of feminist history: they signal Ally's freedom to choose, and show the grim, no-fun days of puritanical feminism that censored rather than liberated, as a thing of the past (McRobbie 2009, 17). This new sexual contract, however, arouses great suspicion over the question of women's legitimate – that is, *conscious* – consent to this contract, as I will discuss shortly.

The effect of triangulation results in this situation *playing out* in post-feminist media culture – particularly in heroine television. But feminist criticism's 'liberatory impulse' works on the premise of oppression (the existence of patriarchy); thus, when heroine television presents *post*-feminist heroines who do not require 'liberating' a traditional feminist critique reaches a deadlock. Moreover, because theories of feminine identity informing feminist cultural criticism have (via epistemological breaks) been foreclosed, traditional methods of critique resist recognition of these ideas expressed in the post-feminist sensibility. What, then, shapes analysis of post-feminist sensibilities in heroine television?

**Post-feminist symptoms**

A psychoanalytic 'reading practice' is not an attempt to deny feminist work; rather, it aims to enhance our understanding of it from a new perspective to reinvigorate debate and open the impasse. Where, for Wallach Scott, psychoanalysis helps identify 'the unconscious dimensions' of discourse and the structures that produce them (2011, 19), feminist debates over post-feminism become 'historically specific discursive orders' that, in their address to the question of feminine identity, attempt to 'enact the symbolic, to eliminate the psychic confusion or anxiety that sexual difference generates' (Wallach Scott 2011, 20). I see several common symptoms emerging in responses to post-feminist sensibilities: notions of 'false consciousness,' a crisis over the meaning of the woman's body, an emphasis on recapitulating feminine identity, and an ambivalence regarding the pleasures of the sensibility (and the scholar's own participation in them), all of which, I suggest, are representative of the foreclosure of psychoanalytic discourses on femininity in feminist cultural criticism.

What does the presumption of 'false consciousness' – the perception that post-feminism is an illegitimate phenomenon masking women's continued oppression by making this oppression 'pleasurable' – negate?[6] As Bilger puts it, post-feminist sensibilities tell us that 'women are equal

enough in theory that they can let down their guard and enjoy their actual subordination' (1997, 316). Characterized by an anxiety that post-feminism is a resurgent patriarchy (in disguise) inducting young women into the 'false consciousness' of feminism's success, this theme is particularly tied to the issue of feminine sexuality and pleasure. The aesthetic performance and practice of visible feminine sexuality in the popular media sphere – described variously as 'porno-chic,' 'raunch culture' (Levy 2005), or simply 'hypersexualized culture' (Dines 2010) – is theorized, for instance, as a type of 'retro' (ironic) sexism (Buszek 2006; Epley 2007), or 'enlightened sexism' (Douglas 2010). Young women embracing the post-feminist *sexual* aesthetic are suspected of doing so under the misapprehension that they are empowered, whilst in reality, as Douglas argues, women only '*allegedly* have the same sexual freedom as men' and have been persuaded that 'patriarchy [is] pleasurable' (2010, 12; my emphasis). This line of thought proposes that women are performing a femininity or sexuality that mimics and satisfies patriarchal economies of desire (under the guise of equality) thus 'undoing' feminist goals of making female pleasure and desire visible and valuable (for example, Dines 2010; Greer 1999; McRobbie, 2004, 2009; Whelehan 2000). Such critiques follow the either-or approach to analysing post-feminism in which, if feminism is absent, patriarchy must be in its place. Within this framework, a woman cannot be the object of male pleasure (and experience pleasure in this) whilst still being an empowered subject. In Greer's analysis (1999, 3), this is a 'fake equality' that is detrimental to women's sexuality because the representation of women's bodies through male models of desire – as fetish or fantasy objects – alienates women from an *authentic* relation to their bodies. In taking this perspective, Greer illustrates the way that feminist criticism remains fixated on *the woman's body and how it is to be interpreted*.[7] The visceral language used to describe sexuality within post-feminist sensibilities suggests an unconscious enjoyment is invested within the description. As with feminist readings of Persephone's abduction, however, enjoyment is negated by displacing it, as the enjoyment of the Other, that is, of patriarchy, as I explore in Chapter 5. Here, unresolved issues regarding feminine sexuality within feminist discourses have come to preclude engagement with forms of feminine *jouissance* or enjoyment contra to feminist agendas. Potentially the result of the journalistic style of many public feminist commentators, such as Greer (1999), and Wolf (2012), this type of scholarship is reminiscent of the work on the mother-daughter relationship in second wave feminisms – such as Rich's work on Persephone – that, Chodorow and Contratto argue (1989), is influenced by unprocessed if

not unconscious ideas toward the topic. Ragland has argued that the work of Lacan 'put an end to an era when it was possible to talk about the human subject without reference to an ethos of the language, desire, and jouissance that structure it' (2004, ix). As I argue in this chapter, however, the epistemological foreclosures of psychoanalysis in feminist discourses have produced conditions where expressions of feminine sexuality cannot be imagined as anything *but* a regressive depiction of patriarchal fantasy. Feminine sexuality, *jouissance*, and desire are treated as illegitimate – as if foreclosed or inadmissible. It is not admissible because it is associated, as with Persephone's abduction by Hades, with desire constituted under 'the law of the father.' Where negation allows repressed material symbolization through the gesture of 'no,' however, foreclosure, for Lacan, is associated with complete rejection – *without* signification of the thing (SIII, 321–2). Though disallowing representations of feminine sexuality as authentic, it is notable that feminist attention to post-feminist sensibilities nevertheless shows an *increased* focus on the woman's body. As the site for the repository for external practices used to signify the interiority of the woman (Gill 2007, 256), the symptomatic return to the meaning of the woman's body, I propose, denotes the foreclosure of the Real.

Where the woman's body has traditionally functioned as a site of potential 'agency, pleasure, desire, and political voice' (Gorton 2006, 105), it has been an object of feminist theorizing, and it is no coincidence that the plot of *Ally McBeal* focused so emphatically on the heroine's body. The central tension of the series oscillates around the question of Ally's authentic identity as a woman, dramatized, according to Leavy (2006), in the character of Ally as hysteric. Drawing on Freud, Leavy argues (2006, 32) that Ally's hysteria is denoted in the pathology of Flockhart's conspicuous anorexia, connoting a radical subversion of Western values (rationalism) through the depiction of Ally's pathological emotionalism. Leavy interprets Ally's hysterical body through the tradition of feminine transgression articulated by Cixous and Clément (1991): a subversive challenge to 'patriarchal social orders' and 'common feminist practice' of radical resistance (Leavy 2006, 31; see also, Nochimson 2000). Leavy thus reads Ally's hysteria as a 'lesson' for the female viewer, not unlike feminist readings of Demeter's actions in the *Hymn* as a 'lesson' for women in patriarchy. Ally/Flockhart's somatic symptom – anorexia – was nevertheless interpreted as 'undoing' the work of the 'good' feminist but, as Leavy observes (2006, 32), the producer's refusal to cover over Flockhart's anorexia was ignored in this debate. By writing neuroticism into the character of Ally, moreover, the series

effectively created a continuation of these public debates in the narrative of the series. Responses to Ally that sought feminism found none and, rather than taking Ally's neurotic questions as a legitimate critique of feminism, much criticism assumed that if the heroine did not represent the values of feminism then she must represent those of feminism's opposite: patriarchy. As I argue in Chapter 5, this binary logic effectively produces 'patriarchy' as a paranoid projection in a defence against the Real. For where theories articulating the Real of sexual difference and feminine *jouissance* have been foreclosed, they can only be recognized as existing externally, where they are negated, as the desire of the Other.

Ally's failure to be a 'good' feminist also indicates another symptom in feminist responses to post-feminism: an ambivalence regarding the scholar's own enjoyment of post-feminist culture. As Brunsdon puts it, a traditional feminist critique constructs 'a series of positions for women' in relation to the text (1993, 312): that is, one can accept the image and *consent* to post-feminism, or reject this image and thus maintain a feminist resistance to it. As Gamble suggests, this effectively attempts to 'lay claim to some kind of "pure" or "correct" version of feminism' (2000, 48), clear in feminist scholarship on post-feminism that begins analysing the heroine/text through 'a vocabulary of feminist concerns' and inevitably finds her/the text 'failing' to uphold feminist values (Brunsdon 2005, 113). The author then 'mobilizes' their own (and presumed audience's) pleasures in the text to illustrate 'the complex and contradictory' ways that the heroine/text negotiates 'living as a woman in patriarchy' (Brunsdon 2005, 113) – sanctioning what pleasure might be found in such un-feminist narratives as the pleasure of witnessing one's own struggle. *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), for example, with its focus on 'feminine' occupations associated with patriarchy (obsessions with fashion and the 'classic romantic fantasy') is consumed ambivalently by feminist scholars as a guilty pleasure that must somehow be aggregated into a framework of 'feminist concerns' (see, for example, Di Mattia 2004; Jermyn 2004). In an echo of feminist interest in Persephone, Maher puts it that 'we feminist pop culture critics are skilled at unearthing progressive potential in what might at first appear to be patently sexist or otherwise conservative depictions of women' (2007, 194).

As McRobbie suggests, this 'complicit critique' denotes the influence of audience studies, where in celebrating viewer's 'pleasures of the text' the scholar runs the risk of over-identifying with the object of analysis and failing 'to interrogate the conditions upon which' such pleasures are 'predicated' (2008, 534–5).[8] Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), and Dux and Simic's *The Great Feminist Denial* (2008) exemplify this 'complicit critique' and illustrate its equally problematic consequences.

In order to address their readers from a position of cultural intelligibility and value – in order that they might be recognized as 'sophisticated' and knowing post-feminist citizens – they must take up the rhetoric of post-feminism, where feminism is 'gone, departed, dead' (Hawkesworth 2004, 969). Consequently, though aware something troubles them about post-feminism (often the question of 'false consciousness'), they cannot articulate a feminist critique while still addressing their audience with the voice of a 'knowing' sophisticated consumer of post-feminist pleasures. As McRobbie suggests (2008), a working theory of pleasure and desire is absent here. Once again, if feminism appears absent, its opposite is assumed but this time, 'in disguise,' to rationalize scholars' own enjoyment with the 'problem of women in patriarchy.'

The trend in *identifying* new types of femininity in post-feminist sensibilities draws attention to the erosion of the theoretical repertoire traditionally used for this task, while at the same time, returning symptomatically to what has been foreclosed: the question of 'woman.' McRobbie, for example, identifies the types of femininity constructed in post-feminist media rhetoric: 'the global girl,' 'the phallic girl,' and 'the can-do girl' (2009); Genz identifies post-feminist femininities in media texts including the 'unhappy housewife,' the 'supergirl,' the 'superwoman,' and the 'singleton' (2009). In addition to identifying post-feminist attributes (Genz 2009; Lazar 2009), Lotz (2006b) codifies broad categories in female-centred drama according to genre: the 'hybrids' of family and action-drama (*Alias*); the 'mixed-sex ensemble' grounded in the workplace (*Grey's Anatomy*); the police-procedural (*Veronica Mars*) or legal practice (*Judging Amy*); the 'comedic dramas' of the single career girl (*Ally McBeal*); and the 'protagonist centered family dramas' (*Gilmore Girls*). These observations remain at the descriptive level, and do not develop understanding of the questions or critique of feminism that post-feminist sensibilities pose. The state of scholarship described here requires, as McRobbie suggests, an 'intervention' (2008).

This book argues that psychoanalysis can provide a new and productive approach to analyzing post-feminist sensibilities and television heroines, not the least because it has never been comprehensively applied to, or taken up by, television studies (with minor exceptions), as I will elaborate on in Chapter 3.[9] I contend that the post-feminist impasse can be thought of as blocked psychic material – in this instance, a collective cultural blockage – that creates a symptom formation in response to what can no longer be openly articulated. Freud puts it that the work of psychoanalysis is to identify within the subject's symptoms 'the dissension between two powers, one of which has made its way to the stage of what is preconscious or conscious while the other has

been held back at the stage of the unconscious' (SE16, 433). While one remains in ignorance of this unconscious power, 'the conflict cannot be brought to an issue' (SE16, 433) and it is at this crossroads that the post-feminist impasse is situated. To borrow Garber's term, the post-feminist impasse is a 'symptom of culture' (1998), a symptom of *post-feminist* culture produced in response to the foreclosures of questions of feminine identity, sexual difference, the meaning of the body of the woman, pleasure, and desire – questions invoked in the Persephone myth, and that which psychoanalytic theory has sought to address. In its increasing shift toward poststructuralist analysis of the 'historical limits' of sexual difference or 'sexuation' (Wright 2001, 31), psychoanalytic discourses can, most obviously, provide theory with which to approach narrative themes of feminine identity articulated in the Persephone narrative. Yet the symptoms of the post-feminist impasse identified here that *repeat* feminist approaches to Persephone are equally relevant to this analysis. Psychoanalysis offers significant insight into questions of feminine enjoyment or *jouissance* with which to approach representations of feminine sexuality in the post-feminist sensibility and, in turn, the negation in feminist critiques of that sexuality as inauthentic. Perhaps most usefully, in the attempt to understand desire, psychoanalytic discourses can open up the field of feminist criticism regarding pleasures beyond the morally 'good' interests of feminism, in new directions. To illustrate how a psychoanalytic reading practice might make sense of post-feminist sensibilities and make sense of the Persephone plot therein, I draw on the example of *Ally McBeal*.

## Post-feminist symptoms, psychoanalysis, and Persephone

*Ally* is unparalleled as a post-feminist text because the symptoms of the post-feminist impasse identified above are transformed in the narrative of the series into *actual* symptoms in the heroine's psychic life, and these symptoms anchor the post-feminist impasse to the myth of Persephone. Throughout the series, Ally experiences a number of psychic symptoms expressed in the visual field of the narrative through digital technology to dramatize Ally's 'inner states' (Smith 2007, 50). Ally hallucinates, dreams, and fantasizes, obsessing over the meaning of these events by analysing them with friends, colleagues, and psychiatrists. Where the audience is also privy to these hallucinations and dreams – they are not translated via dialogue or retrospectively *described* with any authorial hand – their meaning (and even their nature as real or imaginary) remains ambiguous: to Ally, the audience, critics and commentators

alike. Yet, read psychoanalytically, these symptoms offer new and productive ways of understanding the impasse.

Ally's dream of the 'feminist' Laura Dipson (Caroline Aaron) shows us how Ally's story redraws feminine identity as a question within a space where this question has been eclipsed. For Freud, dream material and symptoms are produced by a 'resistance' that denotes a 'conflict' in the subject (SE22, 14); on this basis, dreams and symptoms are communications of this conflict in the form of a 'compromise' (SE22, 14). In Ally's dream, Laura demands Ally accept an award for being a feminist role model, but only if she conforms to the 'appropriate' image of femininity prescribed by feminism: a non-neurotic woman of healthy body weight rather than the 'skinny, whiny, emotional slut' Ally actually is (see 'Love Unlimited' 2.12). The dream expresses the frustration and conflict between 'what it means to be a feminist' (Gorton 2006, 109) and Ally's own question: what it means to be a woman. In addition, it establishes that something is resisted in Ally's narrative, where the impulse to express conflicts with dominant beliefs (here feminism) that are 'striving to prevent its expression' (Freud SE22, 14). Ally's ambivalence towards feminism is established in the dream, yet the dream is shown to the audience as a primary experience, a mimetic element of Ally's narrative; it is only after Ally bites off Laura's nose and later discusses it with a colleague that it is revealed *as* a dream, suggesting difficulty in expressing the content. In the dream, Ally tells Laura 'I don't want to be a role model' or, indeed, want other women 'looking at me at all.' She later frets to her confidante John that she thinks the dream 'makes me feel like a failure as a woman' and further confesses, 'you know, I had a dream they put my face on the cover of *Time Magazine* as the "face of feminism"?' Airing in 1999, after the infamous 'Is Feminism Dead' cover (1998), this scene contextualizes – and renders explicitly self-referential – Ally's role in heroine television and within feminist debates circulating in the wider public domain. The public conflict is represented within the 'safe' expression of the dream, where 'resistance' to the question of what it is to be a woman is negated. In Ally's dream, 'the communicating agency has […] been able to say what it wanted but not the way that it wanted – only in a softened down, distorted and unrecognized form' (Freud SE22, 15).

Ally's image of Genz's 'monstrous' uncanny femininity presents another symptom of the post-feminist impasse: the 'feminist epistemological problem' of sexual difference, or, the meaning of the woman's body in culture. Inspired by de Beauvoir's '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (1997, 295), as we saw in Chapter 1, this question

prompts some to 'reclaim the goddess' for her knowledge of 'woman,' and as a theory that has attempted to elaborate human existence as a tension between biological bodies and organized systems of culture, psychoanalysis is rarely far away. Though feminists often see psychoanalysis as a structuralist theory that conflates anatomical differences with cultural notions of femininity (Tong 1992, 143) as Fuss notes, psychoanalysis is the 'anti-essentialist discourse *par excellence* in that sexual difference is taken as something to be explained rather than assumed' (1989, 6). Freud's work seeks to understand how the biological infant transforms into a thinking being, a human subject created through the acquisition of language – the symbolic organization of meaning in the community – and the absorption of the laws of the culture of this community. Freud's attempt to map this transformation is focused on the tension *between* the biological origins of the human as an animal with instincts and drives, and the *effect* of culture upon those drives, to map what happens when the biological infant is introduced to the social and symbolic structures that organize existence. Freud posits the Oedipal period (roughly between three and six years) as the moment in the child's development when recognition of biological differences must be explained. For both sexes the castration complex – the resolution to the Oedipal phase – is definitive in the subject's identification with a feminine or masculine position: the establishment of sexual difference.

Freud's emphasis on the body is evident in his early work on hysteria (see SE2) that identified a disarticulation of body and psyche in adults where unresolved childhood processes found expression as physical symptoms. As Mitchell has eloquently documented (1986), feminists initially greeted psychoanalysis with hostility, and Freud's premise that 'anatomy is destiny' (SE19, 248–58) is a critical point of contention. While the anatomical distinction between sexed bodies is the raw material with which the subject comes to imagine their gendered identity, it is not given that this body *determines* identity: the subject of feminist interests is what it is *possible* to produce this body *as* in the Symbolic (masculine, feminine). As Rose puts it, 'anatomical difference *is* [not] sexual difference' but, rather, 'comes to *figure* sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be' (1992, 42; original emphasis). Mitchell's (1986) use of psychoanalysis drew other feminists seeking 'a theory of the subject that would release them from the constriction of patriarchal representations' (Wright 1998, 3). Conceptual language such as 'penis envy,' however, remains a point of much resistance. Indeed, Kulish and Holtzman argue (2008) that changing key terms in developmental theory – such as Oedipal

complex and 'castration' – would be progress toward a more nuanced understanding of feminine identity. Bersani notes (1986, 1–2) that when psychoanalysis is used in the humanities it is often on the proviso of not taking Freud 'literally' so as to mitigate seemingly anachronistic elements of his theory. Where Feminists *use* psychoanalysis, for instance, they often overcome critiques of psychoanalysis as 'phallocentric' and patriarchal by defending Lacan as 'ridding Freud of biologism and naturalism,' thus showing 'how masculinity and femininity are produced as the effects of discourse' (Grosz 1990, 143). That is, they draw on psychoanalysis as a poststructuralist discourse to show how language constructs gender and might, then, be re-imagined otherwise.

**The dancing baby and 'the feminist epistemological problem'**

Ally's most famous hallucination, the dancing baby, is perhaps the keenest example of how her symptoms form around the 'feminist epistemological problem.' Before the baby appears, Ally hears the opening lyrics of 'Hooked on a Feeling' – a chorus of earthy male voices chanting 'Ouga-Chucka' – after which a baby in a nappy appears to Ally, running about ('Cro-Magnon' 1.12).[10] Ally's best friend Renée (Lisa Nicole Carson) suggests it is a fantasy produced by her 'biological clock': an unconscious physical impulse to procreate. Ally insists it is not, because 'it dances, it wiggles, it struts around,' but the lyrics of the accompanying song – 'I can't stop this feeling, deep inside of me' – suggest otherwise. In asking what the dancing baby fantasy means, however, Ally *works through* the essentialist/constructionist question – the 'riddle of the nature of femininity' (Freud SE22, 113) as culturally constructed or biologically determined. In 'Worlds Without Love' (2.6), Ally puts it that 'women are not only wired to want what we can't have but we're wired to want what we really don't want.' The statement implies there are two types of 'wiring' in the process of becoming a woman, though paradoxically, 'wired' implies a process *and* an original structure. On one side, 'we're wired to want what we can't have [or at least, within feminist modernity]' – that is, babies and domesticity – implies that the construction of women's desire is organized in accordance with the psychosocial processes of gender identity as in Chodorow's 'reproduction' theory (1978). On the other, 'what we really don't want' implies some form of organic wiring (biology) is in conflict with the conscious aims of the modern sovereign feminist subject. Ally's dancing baby expresses confusion (and anxiety) over the *question* that feminism has foreclosed (rather than a definitive answer) of woman's authentic desire: between the biological of the female body or culturally constructed desires to nurture and procreate.

As with Ally's dream of the feminist Laura, something is resisted in her baby hallucinations: principally, I argue, 'the feminist epistemological problem' as it represents sexual difference. Ally tries several tactics to get rid of her dancing baby (as she does not believe it is her desire), first confronting the baby (yelling 'Nothing's ticking in me! […] I don't want you, I'm not having any baby, and you can't make me think I want you every time I think about sex,' 'Cro-Magnon' 1.12). She later tries to 'kill' the baby with a tennis racket ('The Wedding' 4.23), only to have it turn into a dragon and affirm her own statement that she is 'confront[ing] a demon' in the baby ('Cro-Magnon' 1.12). There are several alternative readings of the baby. It could be construed as a subconscious reminder of the child she is (at this point) ignorant of creating: Maddie. Or, as Freud theorized, female desire for a baby can emerge as compensation for castration, or 'penis envy' (see Freud SE7; SE22, 100, 125–33): in this, Ally's baby fantasy stages a key tension between Freud and feminist theorists. In fact, the baby fantasy/hallucination is first introduced after Ally's encounter with Glenn (Michael Eastern), the life model with a large penis: that is, the baby first appears after Ally's unavoidable confrontation with sexual difference. Yet, as Ally's desire for the baby is ambivalent, it suggests her relation to sexual difference is equally so.

Ally's ambivalence toward the dancing baby is a good example of how a psychoanalytic reading can intervene into the post-feminist impasse articulated in the series through her symptoms. I agree with Leavy that Ally is characterized as hysteric; however, Leavy's interpretation of the hysteric is of a feminist resistance to and *criticism* of patriarchy (2006, 32) – here the 'woman' (hysteric) is retroactively 'liberated' from Freud's patriarchal oppression to offer a lesson of resistance. I argue, in contrast, Ally's neurotic symptoms can be read through Lacan's reading of the hysteric after 'the linguistic turn' (Fuss 1989, 9), as an expression of the fundamental question that is now foreclosed in post-feminist discourses: 'what is it to be a woman?' (SIII, 175). Some interpret Lacan's work with linguistics as an attempt to 'clean Freud's house of biologism' (Fuss 1989, 9) and position psychoanalysis more clearly on the side of constructionism. Where Freud sought to understand the effect of culture on the human animal's drives and instincts, Lacan took Lévi-Strauss' concept of the Symbolic as it constitutes social relations and sought to understand the 'imposition of the law in the unconscious' (David-Menard 1982, 103). One should, however, note that Lacan's work is a *return* to Freud's theory that in many respects seeks to re-elevate the human animal to the forefront of the debate. As Mitchell argues (1992, 19–20), attempts to resolve the 'riddle of femininity' after Freud shifted the debate away from his

central theme of the castration complex at the centre of Oedipal constellations. Through linguistics, Lacan 'denaturalizes' Freud's work on castration by introducing the distinction between real mothers and fathers, real genitals, and the Symbolic and Imaginary functions of these categories to the child's psyche as they enter language and form sexed and gendered identities (Fuss 1989, 7). For Lacan, 'identity' is an 'imaginary concept whose multiple components, [are] enigmatically arranged in a continuous movement of points at the surface of thought' (Ragland 2004, 144).

For Lacan, every subject accepts a signifier in the place of their being, accepting an existential 'lack' as an effect of being able to consciously apprehend themselves in the network of social meaning, the Symbolic Order, and organization of objects and values in the chain of contingent signifiers that is language. This process is known as 'castration' where, as Coats explains,

> the word is not the thing, so that whenever we use words to talk about objects or experiences, there is always a gap, a mediation of the referent through language that necessarily makes the referent other than what it is. Lacan uses a bar between the signifier and the signified to symbolize this gap; think of this bar as a little guillotine that severs (castrates) being from meaning. As the subject emerges into signification, she sacrifices being for meaning, thus assuming as the condition of her identity this symbolic castration. (2004, 80)

This is articulated in Lacan's matheme – an abstract formula symbolizing the subject's psychic structure (see Figure 2.1), where each symbol refers to the functions in Figure 2.2.

$$\frac{S_1}{\$} \rightarrow \frac{S_2}{a}$$

*Figure 2.1* Lacan's formula (matheme) of the subject
*Source:* SXVII, 29.

$$\frac{\text{Agent/Subject}}{\text{Truth/Desire}} \rightarrow \frac{\text{Other/Knowledge}}{\text{Loss/}\textit{Jouissance}}$$

*Figure 2.2* The function of each position in Lacan's formula for the subject
*Source*: SXVII, 92–3.

The signifier ($S_1$) stands in for the subject or 'agent' who has accepted it as a means of being recognizable to another signifier ($S_2$), what is sometimes known as the Other (another subject) or the 'Big Other,' the order of language constructed through the chain of signifiers into which the subject situates themselves as a Symbolic Subject ($S_1$). This is possible only once the agent has relinquished 'being for meaning' and has therefore accepted lack, a subject divided by the unconscious ($). Yet something is lost in this exchange, leaving its trace in the surplus of enjoyment, the *object petite a* (*a*) (Voruz and Wolf 2007, ix). The place of *jouissance* (*a*) is what remains unknown to the Subject yet 'is also the gap, a hole opened up to something' (Lacan SXVII, 19).

Ally's hysterical symptoms take on new resonance in relation to this structure, for the hysteric, in Lacan's formulation, presents a question to the signifier ($S_1$), rather than accepting it in the exchange of being for meaning; consequently, this marks the hysteric as ambivalent towards Symbolic identification with sexual difference. That is, the hysteric refuses castration. In the hysteric's matheme in the place of the Subject/Agent is the unconscious, as the hysteric *exists* in the place of the *Spaltung* (divided subject), as per Figure 2.3.

$$\frac{\$}{a} \quad \rightarrow \quad \frac{S_1}{S_2}$$

*Figure 2.3* Lacan's formula for the 'hysterics discourse'
*Source*: SXVII, p. 29.

As Ragland-Sullivan points out, what this matheme illustrates is that the hysteric 'speaks, as agent, from the lack and gaps in knowledge, language and being' (1992a, 164) and, consequently, for Lacan, the hysteric's relation to the signifier, knowledge, and desire, exposes the mechanisms by which the Subject exists in the Symbolic function (Ragland-Sullivan 1992a, 164). In this light Ally's ambivalence towards the baby – and the unanswered question 'what does it mean?' – might be read as an ambivalence towards sexual difference, for as Lacan argues, '[t]he structure of neurosis is essentially a question' (SIII, 174). All of Ally's symptoms – her dreams, fantasies, and hallucinations and, indeed, the uncanny image of her hysterical femininity – articulate a question about how to signify the woman's body in the Symbolic. In fact, Ally's intense questioning of her symptoms recalls that, for Lacan's hysteric, 'everything that's said, expressed, gestured, manifested, assumes its sense only as a function of a response that has to be formulated concerning this

fundamentally symbolic relation' (SIII, 170). As such Ally's symptoms function as an allegory for the post-feminist impasse over the meaning of the body of the woman. And where Ally's psychic symptoms are *visually* animated for the audience (rather than described), the series allows her symptoms to 'speak' from the unconscious place of the impasse, staging debates over feminine identity that are foreclosed.

Another key symptom is Ally's hallucination, at age seven, of the Unicorn in her living room ('Making Spirits Bright' 2.10). The unicorn's singularity, its 'oneness' denoted by its horn, offers a symbol of wholeness, of a complete being-in-itself. As a clear symbol of the phallus – an imaginary signifier – the unicorn's horn provides an image of one who is *not* castrated in either Symbolic or Imaginary terms. Where the unicorn is one who has not had to 'sever' being for meaning, Ally's fantasy is of an Other without lack, dramatizing the hysteric's psychic structure: her relation to the signifier, castration, and representation in the Symbolic function. Her reluctance to acknowledge it *as* fantasy points to Freud's observations of the hysteric's fantasy life, which is 'carefully cherished by the subject, and usually concealed with a great deal of sensitivity, as though they were among the most intimate possessions of his personality' (SE9, 160). Not only is Ally's wistful memory of the unicorn treated sacredly, she identifies with the qualities of the unicorn. As Mitchell notes, sexual difference is established through a relation to the phallus, 'the mark around which subjectivity and sexuality are constructed,' for it is the presence or absence of the phallus that functions as the mark of the subject's division and situates them in relation to desire (1992, 6–7). As is well noted, the phallus is not a male organ but a *signifier* of difference – the 'third term' that dissolves the mother/child unity and introduces the law of substitution – that is, language (Ragland 2004, 12) – that comes to signify sexual difference. Ally's refusal to identify in Symbolic terms makes her an uncanny reminder of this question in the post-feminist impasse.

## The feminist epistemological problem and Persephone

Perhaps the most important of Ally's symptoms that direct us to the role of Persephone in this impasse is her perpetual melancholy. Articulated not simply as 'heartbreak' over one failed romance, or even many, but as 'one big stress fracture' ('I Know Him By Heart' 2.23), Ally's melancholy provides a metaphor for her relation to the *Spaltung* – her existence as a divided subject – and her reluctance to accept herself as lacking. Brooks notes of the analytic session, that '[t]he analysand always has a story to

tell to the analyst, but it is always a story that is not good enough: links are missing, chronologies are twisted, the objects of desire are misnamed' (1985, 227), and from the beginning of the series, this is Ally's story: links are missing and the objects of desire (finding 'the one' love of her life) are 'misnamed.' In season three, the series produces its own analysis of Ally's symptoms where, like in the analytic clinic, the narrative begins to fill gaps in the subject's history: things are remembered or put into the correct order, and desire comes to be more accurately named. Most importantly, Ally's 'one big stress-fracture' is located in her relation to the original trauma of separation from the mother. In this, *Ally McBeal* posits Ally's symptoms as responses to a primal scene, 'the classically Freudian trauma she experienced at 3 years old, of seeing her mother having sex with another man' (Harris 2011, 61), for in response to this scene, Ally tells Renée, 'that was the day I started pretending' (see 'Love's Illusions' 2.22 and 'Troubled Water' 3.5).

Feminist interest in Persephone, as we saw in Chapter 1, expressed frustration with the function of the father (in the form of 'patriarchy') as the interloper in the mother-daughter union, lamenting (and fantasizing) the role of the mother in response. Yet, this overlooks the necessary role of the paternal function in placing a taboo on the mother's body, while also negating (in fantasies of 'rape by patriarchy') the role of the mother's desire in the daughter's development. In the context of psychoanalysis, both mother and father (or their substitutes) are central to the castration phase, and the establishment of sexual difference in response to the Real body of the woman. The concept of 'castration' appears to privilege the phallus and thus the father (or his substitute), which, like Zeus' role in Persephone's abduction, vexes feminists (for example, Irigaray 1985b, 38). Mitchell invokes Freud when she notes that the 'castration complex' is 'the bedrock' of the subject, '*the* insistence of the humanisation [sic] of the child in its sexual difference' (1992, 19). For as Freud puts it, when a castration complex (for women, 'the wish for a penis') is uncovered, the analyst perceives that they have 'penetrated all the psychological strata' and 'reached bedrock' (SE23, 252) and, indeed, the success or failure of this complex 'determines the fortunes of a woman's femininity' (SE23, 251). Female psychoanalysts accepting this theory have been described as 'dutiful daughters' of the father's law (Grosz 1990, 142–87; see Gallop 1982) – and by implication, are 'bad' feminists. The vexation concerns the status of the phallus as a signifier of the Real that denotes the penis and, thus, produces patriarchy as a consequence of the anatomical distinction between the sexes. As we saw with literature on Persephone, those seeking equality

of sexual difference, such as Irigaray, are in contrast 'defiant daughters' for trying to *undermine* the significance of the Father's phallus (Grosz 1990, 142–87).

This question of the phallus' status – as Real, Symbolic, or Imaginary – returns us to the question of myth's function: what is the function of the phallus and the mother in the Real and how does this inform gender in the Symbolic? Wright observes that Lacan's emphasis on the function of the phallus is not incidental 'insofar as the phallus has played the role of the penis in the cultural fantasies and imagination of the West' such as 'ancient Greek Dionysian mysteries' and, moreover, clinical case studies (2001, 21). That is, like myth, the phallus signifies something of the Real – not directly, but as a *referent* for the Real in Symbolic and Imaginary orders of experience. Because the child's 'first object' (usually the mother, as primary carer), is interrupted by 'something or someone' (usually the father) who represents the phallus, the mother's desire is perceived to be, in the child's fantasy, the phallus (Mitchell 1992, 23), so that '[h]enceforth, the girl will desire to have the phallus and the boy will struggle to represent it' in order to be what will satisfy the first love object (Mitchell 1992, 7). Ally's hysteria becomes clearer when considered in light of her relationship to her mother, for it is in relation to the mother's desire that the hysteric is situated, as the father only 'attains his full function as symbolic father when the mother acknowledges his word as the only one that can mobilize her desire' (Restuccia 2006, 85). Neither the child nor the parental objects involved in this schema are required to be biologically male or female in order to take up the positions of male and female, mother or father; indeed, the effect of the phallus reveals the 'constructed' quality of sexual difference (Mitchell 1992, 6–7). And there is nothing, Mitchell notes, in this to indicate a 'natural heterosexual attraction' 'ordained in nature' nor, indeed, a 'genderised sex – there cannot at the outset be a male or female person in a psychological sense' (1992, 11) rather, sexuation is a *process*.

For Lacan 'sexuation' is a term for the 'process by which we unconsciously "choose" our mode of being as either feminine or masculine' (Wright 2001, 18). Lacan's statement that 'there is no sexual relation' – or, as Evans translates it (1996, 181) 'there is no relation between the sexes' – denotes the Symbolic and Imaginary designations of feminine and masculine positions, returning us to the role of myth in the human condition. In the transition from nature to culture, the placement of taboos serve to organize the drives and in doing so, institute meaning onto the Real in the formation of culture and the Symbolic order. Masculine and feminine positions become ways of signifying sexed

bodies by exchanging 'being for meaning' as Symbolic order identities. In the Real, there is no sexual relation; instead, 'all sexuality is marked by the signifier' (Evans 1996, 181), and myth covers the gap. Indeed, Barthes' mythology informs television studies precisely in this function. As Fiske puts it, myth is the way 'a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature' and, in contemporary contexts, television has become the site for the production of myths about 'masculinity and femininity, about the family' (1982, 93; quoted in Tulloch 1990, 6). Ally's question, 'what is it to be a woman?' stages a question of the Real within this contemporary space of myth-making: heroine television.

Kulish and Holtzman's use of Persephone is, in part, a refusal of Lacan's thesis on 'sexuation' because, they argue, it implies that social structures of sexual inequality are produced unalterably through language: that language 'constitutes cultural structures and *not the other way around*' (2008, 54; original emphasis). The Persephone myth is introduced here to establish a different language for female Oedipal processes – effectively 'a story of her own' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 65). In other words, the Persephone myth *stands in* for what is resisted in debates over femininity and, by the end of *Ally McBeal*, a restoration of the myth has likewise come to *stand in* for what has been resisted in the series: the trauma that led to Ally's symptoms – a particular melancholy over separation from a mother who does not accept the (symbolic) father as that which motivates her desire. These parallels indicate that the Persephone myth serves a particular function in the debate over feminine identity: that it fills the space in post-feminism where something is foreclosed – the feminist epistemological problem – just as it fills the space in feminist discourses where something is foreclosed – the Real of sexual difference.

The series thus establishes that Ally's hysterical fantasies are the result of an unresolved *Persephone complex*: the unresolved Oedipal triangulation between mother, daughter, and father 'marked by incestuous conflicts and desires and their dynamic consequences' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 33). At age three, Ally learns that her father is *not* the only one to mobilize her mother's desire, nor indeed is Ally; like Korê, she calls out to her mother (goes to her with an ear ache), but goes unheard. In prioritizing the primary scene as the cause of Ally's symptoms, the series subsequently illustrates how preoccupations with 'equality' that negate sexual difference do not resolve questions of sexuation. In other words, Ally's feminist successes in the workplace do not help her address the question of 'what it means to be a woman.' As Ragland puts it,

> Even if the girl is told from birth on that there is no difference between her and a boy at the level of aspiration, brains, professional future, and so on, it will be her mother's unconscious desire regarding the phallus – the difference qua difference – that determines the 'content' of the daughter's Ideal ego, not the conscious politically correct language of the child's symbolic order, or her mother's. (2004, 148)

Subsequently, *Ally McBeal* animates the 'complex nexus of fantasies and relationships' structured within Persephone's story, in which 'themes of separation and rapprochement between mother and daughter' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 34, 46) that have gone unresolved constitute a *complex*. For Freud, a 'complex' refers to the collection 'of strongly emotional thoughts and interests' that are partially unconscious and in conflict with consciously held beliefs (SE15, 109), therefore while the Persephone myth is not itself a complex, Ally's Persephone story is. It is at an impasse, just as the myth reaches a deadlock before Persephone and Demeter are reunited. Here, as with her dream of feminist Laura, Ally's 'strongly emotional thoughts' regarding her mother conflict with her *consciously* held feminist beliefs such that they become cathected in a complex.

In this, Ally provides a condensed narrative image of the post-feminist impasse: debates over her image are absorbed into the narrative of the series and manifest as her psychic symptoms. Significantly, the *cause* of these symptoms is located in her Persephone complex. Ally illustrates that where feminism is absent in the text, the Persephone myth stands in to animate unresolved feminist *questions* – the 'feminist epistemological problem' of sexual difference. Here, the Persephone myth is a narrative symptom of post-feminism denoting 'a compromise formation' (Freud SE22, 15) – a means of expression that 'arises where the word fails' and 'articulates itself in a coded, ciphered form' (Žižek 1992, 424). Thus, rather than asking what symptoms of feminism (or femininity) there are in the text, I ask: what of this narrative symptom – of Persephone – can contribute to our understanding of the post-feminist impasse? The following chapter explores the deployment of psychoanalytic theory towards narrative studies and, building on the example of *Ally McBeal*, considers the function of fantasy in the construction of the Persephone myth within the narrative space of heroine television. How is the Persephone myth produced and consumed in contemporary television practice?

# 3

# Persephone as Narrative Symptom: Narrative Transactions in Long-Form Viewership

If the narrative of Persephone in post-feminist heroine television is a symptom that substitutes for the deadlocked debates about the body of the woman in culture, how is it staged for the viewer? I continue with *Ally McBeal* to illustrate how this Persephone symptom can be read as a form of fantasy – a structure that acts out what has been foreclosed – and ask, what is the relationship, in the consumption practices of fans and long-form serial texts, between the textual symptom (Persephone) and the producers and consumers of this symptom? For Peter Brooks, 'the study of human fiction-making and psychic process are convergent activities, and superimposable forms of analysis' (1994, 35–6), and I propose that the relationship is, on a cultural level, analogous to the dynamic in the psychoanalytic clinic, where the analysand presents his or her symptom to the analyst for examination and interpretation, just as the presentation of the Persephone myth in heroine television is examined and interpreted by the audience through the negotiated decoding practices of individual viewers. The more successful the animation of the symptom, the more audiences identify with and seek out the narrative, effecting a positive transference, what Brooks calls the narrative 'transaction' (1985, 216–37).

As it is not consistently or comprehensively drawn on in television studies, psychoanalysis appears as a shadowy figure informing television theory largely omitted in the dominant paradigm of 'media studies' in the academy. Silverstone's consideration of television as a transitional object in the viewer's world – as 'invulnerable' and 'dependable' as the phantasm of relations with the original object, the mother (1999, 8–15) – is advanced by Bainbridge to suggest television can 'negotiate the threat of

anxiety present in everyday life' that is 'especially pertinent' to the 'fragmentary nature of experience in a postmodern setting' (2014, 51). Because early television studies were located in the mass-communication fields informed by critical theories of political economy and critiques of the culture industry, television has largely been seen as 'bad' object of ideology that dupes and pacifies audiences. Where the ethnographic approaches of cultural studies have attempted theorize audiences and spectatorship as more active and engaged, however, they have rarely drawn on psychoanalysis, in part, I suggest (as with fan scholarship), from the fear of pathologising the audience and, indeed, the television scholar (see Hills 2002, 95). Moreover, television is predominantly dismissed as 'domestic': it is an ordinary, everyday object in the home, made up of a multitude of themes, genres, modes of address, and viewing audiences that have little in common. In contrast to film – television's long-standing superior as an art 'object' – television has been perceived, historically, as a 'throw-away medium' that is 'easily devoured and dispensed with' (Jacobs and Peacock 2013, 7): it is watched discretionally and, with the wide take-up of various technologies, recorded and re-watched according to discrete needs, tastes, and schedules. Given the deployment of the Persephone plot in visual art, film, literature and, most recently, opera (Klein 2014), how does television, as a medium, profit the animation of Persephone themes? Jacobs and Peacock have argued (2013, 7–9) the temporal qualities of serialized television are captured in the psychotherapeutic plot of *In Treatment* (2008–10), where 'the potential significance of individual passing instances, thoughts, gestures and words' illuminate the medium's 'expressive possibilities' of making the seemingly 'brief, temporary and transitory' contribute to 'a whole' in the 'expansive structure' of long-form narrative. Indeed, as Bainbridge observes (2014, 52), the prominence of analytic *practice* within television dramas – *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), for instance – 'engender fantasies particular to the distinct, culturally specific television flow in which any given broadcast takes place.' That is, as Silverstone notes, it is the very domestic 'everyday' quality of television as an object in the home that produces psychical intimacy and unconscious engagement; for television is not a 'neutral object,' rather, a 'complex communication of sound and image with already powerful reality and emotional claims' imbedded within (1999, 15).

## Psychoanalysis and television studies

A longstanding and recently critiqued rationale for rejecting psychoanalytic theory in television studies derives from a supposed contrast to

film. The darkened theatre and 'captive' audience of a cinema projection was alien to television's domestic location and fragmented audience. As a theoretical concept, Metz's theory of imaginary identification (1974), argues the intimacy of the darkened cinema, where a spectator is witness to a larger than life image, creates conditions similar to the experience of a dream. Effectively then, for Metz, the subject's experience of the screen image replicates Lacan's 'mirror-phase' for the subject where the disarticulated body of the infant is given an Imaginary self-image of coherence as it is propped in a mirror (see E, 3–9). Thus, in theory at least, the cinema experience recreates a fantasy identification with a screen image. Mulvey's thesis (1989), alternatively, argues the fetishistic treatment of the woman in the film as an object in the visual narrative *structure* creates a masculine viewer position. Particular shots, camera angles and editing of scenes, Mulvey argues, structure the viewer's experience from the (male) hero's point of view such that the experience of the spectator is organized by sexual difference. Recent work in cinema studies considers these earlier approaches to have misunderstood and, subsequently, misapplied psychoanalytic theory to screen spectatorship (McGowan 2003; McGowan and Kunkle 2004). As McGowan notes, the 'universalizing claims' of film spectatorship now seem 'naïve' and have been replaced by a critique that only makes 'local, particular claims' (2007, ix). Television – differentiated from cinema through its multiple genres and their different modes of 'enunciation' – was even further distinguished by its collaborative production process, as opposed to the putative auteurism of cinema production (Flitterman-Lewis 1987, 220; Nelson 1997, 235–6). Mulvey's theory was, nonetheless, considered to be a relevant approach to analysing advertizing broadcast *on* television, but not standard television texts such as drama or comedy (Fiske 1999).

Early resistance to psychoanalytic criticism in studies of television speaks of dominant epistemologies in the social science traditions of mass communications and media studies. Nevertheless, with the carving out of a niche 'television studies' field that treats television as a discrete object, psychoanalytic theory can extend and enhance our understanding of long-form narratives as discussed within the frame of 'quality' television and audience pleasures. I draw on psychoanalysis to understand both the *narrative* of the Persephone plot, and the audience's interest in it as a representation of what it means to be a woman in post-feminist cultures. That is, I shift the focus from a theory of spectatorship and modes of 'looking' to consider the dynamic of analysis in the clinic: the reading or listening practices of storytelling

and meaning construction between analyst and analysand. Though the content of the television text has long occupied feminist media studies and cultural criticism, much of this scholarship has, McRobbie observes (2008), been oriented toward the female audience. Nelson notes, 'the emphasis in 1980s ethnographic audience study on what people do with television rather than how it impacted upon them' denotes a 'tendency to celebrate the creativity of the reader in the act of consumption, at the expense of acknowledging the qualities of the text' (2007, 167). And though scholarship on television as a 'quality' object has increased in the last decade, it has not done so in isolation from questions of industrial influences.

The industrial, political, and economic contexts of television production and consumption are significant in that they prohibit reading intentional 'meanings' within programme content for, even if this meaning were to exist, audience studies show that readers decode textual messages in a variety of frameworks. The reading practices of viewers who decode what has been *en*coded in the text and identify, reject, or 'negotiate' the 'dominant' message (Hall 1973) has had a strong influence on television studies (Fiske 1999, 66), to the extent (for some) that, as Schrøder puts it,

> The text itself has no existence, no life, and therefore no quality until it is deciphered by an individual and triggers the meaning potential carried by this individual. Whatever criteria one wishes to set for quality, therefore, must by applied not to the text itself, but to the readings actualized by the text in audience members – readings that are multiple and heterogeneous. (1992, 207)

Critiques such as Schrøder's respond to two themes that have shadowed television throughout its history under the mass-communications paradigm: the 'hypodermic needle' or 'magic bullet' theories that stupefied audiences will absorb content uncritically or be filled with subliminal messages. That is, the belief that television is a 'bad' cultural object. These assumptions continue to plague the popular imagination and, over the last half of the twentieth century, television studies have sought to redress them via the fields of fandom and 'Quality TV.' Many elements of a television narrative are, of course, the result of industrial circumstances, such as disputes between actors and production companies, conflicting schedules and post-production network demands, so it is difficult to claim any particular significance of narratives produced within these circumstances without acknowledging their origin. Yet

these industrial influences can only account for the particular narrative of *one* series, they cannot adequately account for production of the Persephone myth in so many series, across a range of genres, in a specific era.

The Persephone plot forces us to attenuate Schrøder's claim the text is meaningless without the audience by observing that no audience is looking at a blank screen but, rather, a structurally familiar scene that animates the individual's relation to this textual object (as Silverstone and others argue). Though multiple writers, actors, and industrial elements of production shape what is, to those involved, a fragmented assemblage of creative input, the viewer is largely hidden from these mechanisms and receives the television object, as Silverstone puts it, as a 'pre-packaged' whole, where the flow of programming across the network presents a constancy of seemingly ontologically secure narrative worlds (1999, 7, 15). Not only is psychoanalytic practice increasingly part of television narratives then, but, as an 'object' in the viewer's environment, television becomes an 'object of the internal world' of the viewer that emerges in the clinic of psychoanalytic practice (Bainbridge et al. 2014, xvi).

Differences in psychoanalytic criticism are not related to the textual object or discipline from which they derive – such as literary, television or cinema studies – but, rather, the type of psychoanalytic theory underpinning the approach (Wright 1998). In the application of instinct or id-psychology, for instance, the critique focuses on the *content* of the text as the representation of a repressed wish foreclosed to consciousness, where traces of the id's energy breaks through as a 'return of the repressed;' alternatively, applications of ego-psychology are concerned with the way that this repressed material takes shape, 'that which "controls" the wish, the work's formal devices' (Wright 1998, 12).[1] Where the Persephone symptom gives shape to the question of the body of the woman and the meanings her image signifies – the question of sexual difference – I suggest the Persephone myth is the *form* given to the content of the post-feminist impasse that is shaped through the particular formal systems of genre and context: heroine television in the post-feminist era – where feminism's influence on culture denotes what is *permissible* and what is foreclosed. Here, questions of sexuation remain unconscious and conflict with consciously held ideas about feminism. What can analysis of the formal qualities shaping this content (the Persephone plot) tell us about the feminist epistemological problem?

## Fantastic narrative, melodrama, and the symptom

Despite the diversity of formal and stylistic mechanisms in the genres of heroine television, each fits a definition of melodrama that features the 'heightened plot and exaggerated emotions' of extreme scenarios (Ang 1985, 62). In fact, the presentation of the Persephone myth as a narrative symptom denotes what Brooks argues is the underlying force of melodrama's excessive narrative mode, the 'effort to signify' and make meaning of conflicting or opposing forces (1995, xiii). As is the case with the Persephone myth, the mother-daughter relation has historically been a central trope of this genre (Gorton 2009); in this light, the mother's *absence* in the post-feminist retelling of the myth is of some significance. The themes of Persephone's narrative identified in the introduction to this book require, to some extent, extreme or improbable plot devices (especially the heroine's death and rebirth) to facilitate them. As such, heroine television animating the Persephone myth is frequently 'fantastic' in that, like Todorov's theory, the narratives produce moments of hesitation or suspense when, despite the depiction of a world consistent with the reality principle, 'there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world' (1973, 25). Ally McBeal's dancing baby hallucination is a good example. For Ally (and the audience), two possibilities are present: one, the event is an 'illusion of the senses' or 'a product of the imagination' – in which case the narrative world is confirmed as being that of 'reality.' Two, evidence is produced to legitimate the event as having taken place and thus becomes viewed as 'an integral part of [the protagonist's] reality' (Todorov 1973, 25). While in the latter, the reader must conclude that the narrative is in the form of 'a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous' where 'this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us,' such as the supernatural or science fiction and fantasy genres (Todorov 1973, 25). I suggest Ally's dancing baby hallucination fits both categories in that, as an 'illusion of the senses' the dancing baby is an expression of Ally's unconscious and a part of her 'reality' (a reality consistent with psychoanalytic theory) for Ally questions the dancing baby's *meaning*, not that she sees it. As Johnson notes (2005, 3), much contemporary television uses the fantastic to create new aesthetic styles that, by breaking with old formats, ask the audience to shift their expectations of how genres work. Like *Ally* many Persephone plots exemplify this trend, creating moments of hesitation as viewers learn the new rules of what can be expected or given as 'reality' in

the narrative; I suggest this is not only a formal necessity of heroine television in order to animate the conscious and unconscious material involved but, in addition, that this fantastic hesitation also promotes the viewer's transference and analytic work. Fantastic hesitation opens up a space for fantasy, projection, and reflection: moreover, it facilitates if not fundamentally encourages the reconnaissance work required in the work of analysis.

This particular feature of the hermetic possibilities of the series establishes an exchange value of meanings within the contextual space of the narrative. The narrative structures of *Ally McBeal*, *Alias*, and *Grey's Anatomy* all make use of the fantastic – as do the post-feminist comedies *Drop Dead Diva* and *Samantha Who?* – even though these programmes present the Persephone myth in a contemporary setting otherwise depicting a type of social reality (albeit a commercially produced, Hollywood reality). In its use of 'the uncanny' gothic narratives are also often fantastic in style. And I suggest fantastic 'hesitation' is present in Genz's theory of gothic femininity within post-feminist cultures (2007), for the dual, contradictory image of femininity in post-feminism – haunted by uncanny images of past femininities – creates an uneasy moment of suspense over the meaning of this image as it exposes a 'return of the repressed.' The post-feminist impasse is, likewise, a type of fantastic moment: a suspended space in which a central question is unanswered for the audience of post-feminist culture – as evidenced by the feminist confusion over 'what' post-feminism is or means. It is precisely, as Ang notes, the 'sensational improbability' of melodrama that allows things to be 'brought to the surface which otherwise would remain hidden' (1985, 68) as, I argue, the Persephone plot in post-feminist heroine television demonstrates.

It is not only a question of *what* is 'brought to the surface' in the post-feminist iteration of the Persephone myth, however, but the form this surfacing takes, for the *fantasies* enabled by the fantastic and melodramatic excesses tell us something of the post-feminist impasse for which the Persephone myth stands in. In psychoanalytic theory, fantasy is not the obtaining of an object but, rather, the staging of a scene in which something foreclosed or forbidden is made possible (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 314). As Burgin puts it, fantasy is neither 'a mental image of a desired object' nor a matter of 'summoning imaginary objects' but, 'involves the total context and activity in and through which the object may be attained ... [it] is a matter of staging, of *mise-en-scène*' (1992, 85). Fantasy is thus the production of a scene that *enables*, a structure that allows something forbidden to play out in the narrative. Indeed, in

its original Greek *phantazein*, fantasy means 'to make visible' (Cowie 1997, 127). What does the structure of the Persephone plot in post-feminism make visible? What does it make possible? What fantasy is dramatized?

In *Ally McBeal*, the Persephone plot structures a solution to the feminist epistemological problem articulated in Ally's hysterical symptoms (described in the previous chapter). In the final season, Ally is approached by a young girl, Maddie (Hayden Panettiere), claiming to be her daughter ('A Kick In the Head' 5.11), making Ally's desire for a child manifest in a fantasy scene of Korê's return. The audience learns that, in a fantastic narrative twist, Ally had her eggs harvested ten years prior on the proviso she 'would be informed if ever they were used' (5.11). The eggs were mistakenly given to a single man who used a surrogate to have Maddie, who, in the wake of her father's death, tracks Ally down to live with her. In the fantasy of Korê's return, the series effectively redresses what Ally cannot properly do in reality: rectify the flaw in her own mother-daughter drama, the 'essential female tragedy' (Rich 1986) of Ally's triangular conflicts.

Fantasy is one of the most important productions in the subject's structure for, where it 'is a form of representation, of thinking, which can be read as a symptom' (Cowie 1997, 165), it denotes something of the subject's mental life that is as 'real' as their conscious expression. Ally's hysterical symptoms, produced throughout the series as expressions of her unresolved Persephone complex, are confirmed as 'real' in the final season, when the fantastic narrative makes it possible to dramatize Ally's decision to both enjoy and identify with her symptom. Like the analysand in the clinic, Ally (via the producers) 'decides what to do with her unconscious' (Azari 2008, 55): she enters into a fantasy structure in which the contents of her symptom (her Persephone complex) are resolved. Korê's (impossible) return provides a means of mastering castration, restoring the desired 'wholeness' depicted in her earlier fantasy of the unicorn. As Verhaeghe and Declercq argue 'the finally analyzed subject, [is] the subject that has made a choice to identify with (the Real kernel of) his symptom or *object a*' (2002, 65). Ally adopts this principle, and indeed, not only 'enjoys her symptom' (Žižek 2008a), but identifies with it as a privileged point of her existence, accepting the 'particular way' that her *jouissance* in the symptom 'is bound to a certain signifying formation' (Cowie 1997, 296).

Because a television series is a multi-authored text, however, the fantasy constructed there cannot be attributed to any one person nor, contrarily, can it belong to the audience. Nonetheless, as I demonstrated

in the previous chapter, heroine television has long been a repository for the distillation and dramatization of political and *cultural* discourses. Television is, thus, as Wright argues of other art forms, a site of public and social communication and symbolic exchange, a site of 'collective fantasies' that have localized 'historical determinates' that can be analysed in a manner analogous to the subject's individual symptoms or fantasies (1998, 3). The creators of the text are subject to the same social, political, and ideological world views that the audience experiences and, as such, the production is shaped by the same social taboos shared by the audience, rather than the producers simply constructing and imposing these mores on the audience (Cowie 1997, 129). The narrative functions on a dual economy, where the conscious or 'overt level of story' is embedded within the context of external censorship (social values or mores which the production studio and network upholds) that, consequently, 'enables a different structure or wish to arise' within the unconscious or symbolic narrative themes of the text (Cowie 1997, 149). That is, while social attitudes might foreclose certain narrative events from taking place – for example, engagement with questions of sexual difference that queer political consciousness has superseded – the producers can structurally organize the narrative in ways that subvert these foreclosures. By staging a *mise en scène* that allows the particular foreclosed desires to be fulfilled, the text substitutes the disavowed with a structure of fantasy (Cowie 1997, 144–52). In effect then, although the fantasy is produced by the creators of each series, it can be enjoyed with less inhibition by the spectator, because in the fantastic (unrealistic) structure of a text that has been authored by someone else, 'the fantasy origin of the material is disguised' and, subsequently, the audience 'can overcome the internal censorship which fantasy in the adult – and especially material related to primal fantasies – is subject to' (Cowie 1997, 141). The structural organization of the heroine within the Persephone narrative functions in such a fashion, for the spectator is able to take pleasure in the fantasy material presented without guilt or the need to build a defence against it.

The innovations of medical science that create Maddie in *Ally McBeal* is a good example, as it overcomes the post-feminist impasse that Ally's baby hallucinations expresses: the epistemological question over the essential or constructed status of woman's reproductive desire. The writers issue Ally with a reproductive *fait accompli* that circumvents this question altogether and, simultaneously, avoids any criticism of Ally as a single mother, as is increasingly common in post-feminist rhetoric

(McRobbie 2009, 80–5). In contrast to Murphy Brown's decision to become a single mother, Ally cannot arouse censure for denying the father his legal rights as he is dead. Like the Hollywood films in Cowie's analysis, the dominant moral code of the social world is upheld, while the heroine has been allowed her desire.[2] Maddie exists, and Ally is able to take pleasure in her, regardless. The feminist epistemological problem has been overcome and, consequently, so has the post-feminist impasse, via a fantasy Persephone structure.

The consumption practices associated with long-form 'quality TV' narratives shape the dynamic relationship between author, audience, and the Persephone symptom/narrative. Few heroine television programs meet all the criteria of 'quality TV' developed by Feuer et al. (1984) that now forms a discrete field of television studies (such as McCabe and Akass 2007; Nelson 2007), yet many of the markers of quality are implicated in the appeal of the Persephone *narrative symptom*. Quality programming often encounters resistance from 'profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences' (Thompson 1997, 14–15), evident in the fan campaigns to keep the low-rating *Veronica Mars* on air (see Hibberd 2007). Similarly, *Alias*' 'narrative complexity' (Mittell 2006b) and 'shrill aesthetic' style invites us to 'think through its stylistic choices' to consider a closer reading of the narrative (Jacobs and Peacock 2013, 1–8) as a 'quality' text. More generally, though, the representation of the Persephone myth in post-feminist cultures must meet strident market imperatives (see Nelson 2007), as most heroine television airs on network television where it remains beholden to its industrial context and is superficially overlooked as a 'bad' cultural object. As I have argued, however, heroine television *overcomes* the political and economic limitations of its production by adapting its content via the 'fantastic.' The lack of 'realism' in light of the fantastic qualities of heroine television is, consequently, particularly evident in each of the case studies. The Persephone narrative is therefore worthy as a quality object, not for its depiction of a 'social reality' valued in much 'quality' programming (Thompson 1997) but, on the contrary, in its depiction of a symptom that stages a '*psychical* reality of which fantasy is the nucleus' (Cowie 1997, 129; my emphasis). This psychical reality is no less real in its impact or significance to the viewer's experience of reality because it does not depict social realism. Like quality television's depiction of social realism, the Persephone symptom/fantasy can reveal the 'sociocultural forces in play, to set agency in structure, [and] can afford illuminating, sometimes shocking, insights into aspects of contemporary life' (Nelson 2007, 169).

## Persephone as symptom: Fantasy and transference

The way in which audiences *enjoy* the Persephone symptom becomes important in the development of a psychoanalytic approach. Where television is recorded, downloaded as digital files, or purchased in packaged DVD sets, it is consumed through a variety of platforms 'divorced from their original placement within the flow of television' (Richards 2007, 186). These various consumption practices facilitate uninterrupted viewing in the intimate surroundings of personal, domestic spaces such as the home theatre, living room, or bedroom (Nelson 2007, 14–15). In contrast to Williams' theory of 'flow' (Williams and Williams 1990), audiences are no longer restricted to the programming schedule, but are moving to more deliberate engagements with specific texts and demanding specific types of content. Even so, as Thompson notes, much television consumption of broadcast material – in discrete chapters or modules – lends itself to the type of reading practices associated with the novel. The intricate plot arcs woven between episodes and entire seasons – what Mittell calls 'narrative complexity' (2006b) – for example, is a feature of 'quality TV' (Thompson 1997, 13–16) that invites audiences to engage pleasurably in deciphering and decoding sophisticated narratives, as is evident with *Alias* and *Veronica Mars*. These viewing pleasures are encouraged through the availability of boxed set DVD packages, which increase the possibility of 'close textual readings on repeated viewings' (Nelson 2007, 10), as do the relatively unmapped practices of peer-to-peer file sharing, streaming, DVD libraries, and borrowing networks.

The serialized nature of the television narrative (distributed and consumed in both broadcast and post-broadcast eras), gives rise to a particular viewing experience that can be likened to the experience of psychoanalysis in practice – a development that allows for a reappraisal of notions of 'pleasure and desire' in contemporary post-feminist television culture. Television studies have not, historically, successfully incorporated theories of 'pleasure and desire' into their frameworks (Nelson 2007, 18). Neither have cultural studies approaches to fan practices significantly drawn from psychoanalytic theory (Hills 2002). It is this blind spot that McRobbie refers to in both her work on post-feminism (2009), and her call for an intervention into feminist media and cultural studies methodologies (2008). And it is here that I ask how narrative *functions* for audience's experience of narrative themes, rather than seeing these narratives merely as vehicles for post-feminist discourses or as more 'bad' feminist rhetoric projected onto a passive

audience. Audiences are discerning, active readers and consumers who interpret texts according to their situated experiences of the world (Fiske and Hartley 2003; Hall 1973). In asking what the Persephone narrative *enables* in its symptom/fantasy structure, I also ask what the audience's engagement in this narrative is as a continuous relationship over the series: why is the Persephone symptom so popular in post-feminist culture?

A parallel between novelistic reading practices and the dynamic of the psychoanalytic clinic is in the presentation of the symptom at the beginning of each. As Brooks theorizes, a central tension that 'demands' to be narrated underpins the opening scene of every narrative (1985, 103) and, likewise, the subject presents what they have identified as their symptom for the analyst to decipher. In literary terms, this presentation of the symptom can be thought of as Propp's *sjuzet* or plot (1990). The structure of the Persephone plot is commonly introduced in the pilot episode of the series when the heroine is awakened or alerted to her status as a Persephone figure, such that she (and the audience) are presented with a symptom that demands further explanation. The narrative then takes on the shape of the *fabula* (story) where '*fabula* – "what really happened" – is in fact a mental construction that the reader derives from the *sjuzet*, which is all that he ever directly knows' (Brooks 1985, 13). In the clinical setting, the patient repeatedly returns to the site of the symptom's eruption in their life, in order to 'work through' its contents. Such repetition of the symptom is, Brooks argues, an unconscious 'compulsion to repeat' that takes on 'a form of remembering, brought into play when recollection properly speaking is blocked by resistance' (1985, 98–9). That is to say, the symptom emerges every time the blocked material the symptom stands in for comes into conflict with the mechanisms of defence or repression, until such time as the subject is able to uncover and make sense of this material.

The repetition of the Persephone myth throughout post-feminist heroine television, likewise, persistently presents a symptom – one that the audience is repeatedly drawn to. The Persephone figure represents something that is 'blocked by resistance' and, indeed, 'repeats' until what is foreclosed can find signification. The audience is guided in this process by the heroine of each series, who, as Ally McBeal elegantly demonstrates, is frequently engaged in the project of a type of psychoanalysis in practice: the working through of blockages that are expressed as a symptom formation. That is, as the heroine awakens to her position as a Persephone figure, the audience is invited to decipher the contents of this symptom *with* her.

To be sure, there is not, somewhere in the representation of Persephone in post-feminist television narratives, a fixed 'truth' that can be deciphered and answered with finitude as to the myth's prominence. Rather, I suggest that each viewer is attracted to the particular structure and animation of the Persephone plot in different series that become informed by their own particular analysis of it. Kahr has observed that many patients 'introduce their television into the fabric of the clinical encounter' where, however unconsciously, they call on events from programmes that facilitate or 'springboard' the exploration of their own 'memories and fears,' 'fantasies,' and 'projections' – often as 'a means of communicating hitherto preconscious or unconscious material' (2014, 32–40). For Schweizer (1994, 15), another parallel between psychoanalytic practice and reading practice is the negotiation between analyst and analysand over what will be considered 'truth' through the process of analysing the subject's past. This past is 'a self-conscious, interminable textual edition of the past, a story always under revision, always in transition between reader and text or between analyst and patient' (Schweizer 1994, 15). Similarly, Rickard likens this process to the experience of transference in the analytic session, where 'plot' becomes an element in the construction of 'pragmatic, rather than empirical, truth' (1994, 7): that is, a truth that serves a particular purpose of understanding – of making sense of – the past. Brooks sees this as a mutual process between the teller of the story and the listener or reader, what is in the clinic called 'transference' (1985, 216). As he argues,

> the relation of the teller to listener inherently is part of the structure and the meaning of any narrative text, since such a text (like any text) exists only insofar as it is transmitted, insofar as it becomes a process of exchange. (1994, 50)

The increasingly transparent dialogue between creators and audiences of programming recalls the immediacy and intimacy of the psychoanalytic clinic in the collaborative production of the cultural symptom/fantasy. As Wright notes '[t]o free the patient of his or her most debilitating symptom, to release the flow of desire where it has got trapped, the analyst relies on the patients' living response' (1998, 192). And this 'living response' is readily available, I suggest, on websites such as 'Grey Matter' – a blog maintained by writers of *Grey's Anatomy* that provided an open forum for audiences to request particular characters to feature more prominently, directing the writers towards the types of narratives they enjoyed and wanted to see more of.[3] *Veronica Mars* similarly stayed

on air as a consequence of fan activism (Cochran 2011, 172). Given, then, that writers and audiences co-produce the symptom/fantasy and its potential meanings, I aim at texts that, in their unique genre qualities represent diverse audiences, to identify some of the *common* features of the Persephone symptom amidst the plethora of heroine television.

Though Ally resolves her narrative through the fantasy of Korê's return, the series ends on a moment of irresolution. In the final shot Ally walks tearfully away from her urban family to begin a new life in New York, opening up a space for new 'textual desire' to take shape. Indeed, in 'A Kick in the Head' (5.11), Maddie's aunt Bonnie (a blues night-club singer), sings a medley of theme songs from popular American sitcoms and television dramas at the bar beneath Ally's office. She turns to Ally and sings the title theme of the first significant television heroine *Mary Tyler Moore* (1970–7), 'You're Gonna' Make it After All,' as if self-consciously placing Ally in the canon of heroine television. This manoeuvre implies that Ally is about to embark on a significant new journey – the type of catalyst set-up for the pilot episode of a new series – and thus poses a type of narrative question: what will become of the post-feminist heroine now? What will shape her narrative image beyond these first illustrations? This question was already finding form in other heroine television, such as *Judging Amy* (1999–2005) and *Gilmore Girls* (2000–7), where a full reunion of the triple Goddess Korê/Persephone/Demeter takes place; in both, a post-feminist Persephone with her own young Korê returns home and attempts to restore broken down relations with her mother/Demeter.[4] Contemporaneously with *Ally* (1997), *La Femme Nikita* introduced a new television heroine to the small screen who, motherless, is abducted into an underworld.[5] By 2001, *Alias* had taken up this femme-spy prototype, depicting post-feminism as a 'historical shift' beyond feminism to a new period, with seemingly new problems and questions. The post-feminist impasse is in the narrative *in absentia* (Todorov 1977; Brooks 1995, 24), where it is told through the structure of the Persephone plot. I turn now to this narrative, where this Persephone stands in for the epistemological impasse over the woman's body.

# 4

# Persephone as Epistemological Impasse: The Real Body of Sydney Bristow and 'The Woman Here Depicted'

From the pilot episode onwards, *Alias*' heroine, Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner), finds herself within a Persephone complex rich in similarities to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. As with Korê, Sydney is a young woman alone in the world as her mother, Laura Bristow (Lina Olin), died early in Sydney's childhood, leaving Sydney to the care of an estranged father, Jack Bristow (Victor Garber). Subsequently, as a young adult Sydney is seduced into an 'underground' realm in the form of a secret division of America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) called 'SD-6' ('Section Disparue' – French for 'the section that does not exist'). There, a Hades figure, Arvin Sloane (Ron Rifkin) recruits her as a spy with, as it transpires, the questionable consent of her father. Once immersed in this (yet to be revealed) criminal underworld, Sydney goes through several real and symbolic deaths and rebirths and discovers her body bears the physical markers named in the 500 year old Rambaldi prophecy: 'Mullie Hick Petrata' – The Chosen One. This discovery requires Sydney recover her dead mother (now believed alive as former KGB spy Irina Derevko) in order to distinguish herself from the physical likeness she shares with her. Sydney is mentally and bodily penetrated in relation to this prophecy in a series of symbolic rapes via scientific experiments performed without her consent. She discovers her mother's two sisters who each invoke Hekate as Demeter's helpmate in the search for her lost daughter, for as it turns out, Sydney also has a half-sister in her own image – Nadia Santos (Mia Maestro) – who has, likewise, been recruited into the criminal underworld (without consent) and is also named in the Rambaldi prophecy.

This chapter maintains that these Persephone tropes articulate feminist debates over 'the woman' no longer openly asked in post-feminist cultures, to animate an *epistemological* impasse over the female body. For *Alias* explores the central theme of the post-feminist impasse – feminine identity – via a question posed in the series over the Real body of the heroine and its function in accounting for her specifically *feminine* identity. It does this via the stylistic marriage of action espionage in an Oedipal family melodrama, placing Sydney within a Persephone complex – an unresolved Oedipal space where the triangular relationship between mother, child, and father remain uncertain and unsymbolized. Where this drama is further embroidered with the fantastic circumstances of the Rambaldi plot it invokes an image of Sydney and Irina as the 'twin goddesses' as it prophesizes the destruction of the world by 'the woman here depicted' – either Sydney or her mother. In this way her mother personifies the 'raging goddess' Demeter of potential destruction and Sydney's inquiry into their origins as 'The Chosen One' animates ideas about the mother in feminist and feminist psychoanalytic literature – specifically, Klein's emphasis on the mother's body – simultaneously contrasted with Freud's *fort/da* formulation symbolizing the mother's presence and absence.

Overlaying the emphasis on the essential woman's body and Sydney's specific biology in Rambaldi is a crisis of identity in the question of Sydney's *culturally* constructed 'identity' via her spy masquerade, giving full expression to the epistemological impasse of post-feminism. Where the masquerade plot plays with poststructuralist notions of identity as fluid, unstable, and subversive, however, it exposes a concern for establishing an original, authentic notion of 'Sydney' beneath the signifier. The body of 'the woman here depicted' thus surfaces in the narrative as a traumatic remainder not sufficiently symbolized – repeating as a symptom of the Real foreclosed in feminist debates. Sydney's return to her mother restates this traumatic encounter with the Real, invoking fantasies associated with maternal pre-Symbolic such that Jack enacts his Zeus-like role – the 'function of the father' – of intervening in the imaginary mother-child drama to institute a signifier of difference and Symbolic order identity: what Sydney desires most, to be 'a free agent.'[1]

This chapter explores the clearly psychoanalytic themes of Sydney's Persephone complex as a *narrative* complex that invites the viewer to engage in the work of analysis with Sydney as she explores her origins as a post-feminist Persephone. I then turn to the epistemological impasse in post-feminisms expressed in the heroine's spy masquerade where it is troubled by the Real body of the 'woman here depicted' in the Rambaldi

plot. Finally, I take Sydney's exploration of this impasse over feminine identity and the body of the woman where it remains caught in the pre-Symbolic mother-daughter drama of the *Hymn*, to show the significance of the 'function of the father' to this complex.

## The Persephone myth as narrative complex

Psychoanalytically rich layers of narrative symbolism embellish the Persephone story in *Alias* within debates over the post-feminist sensibility, effectively weaving Persephone into the plot as a narrative 'complex': a conflict between the conscious and unconscious ideas that are connected or aligned and that have 'a great affective force' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 72). Early on, Sydney is bequeathed a 'seed box' from Emily Sloane (Amy Irving) – a Demeter substitute who presents a fantasy mother figure to Sydney (see 'Cipher' 2.3) – engraved with an image of Persephone and Demeter as twin goddesses. Though the box explicitly references the myth, this and other Persephone themes remain unacknowledged, but Sydney's Persephone-like status as a goddess parallels several post-feminist qualities. Physically skilled and highly intelligent, Sydney rises as an unequalled operative in the criminal 'underworld' of industrial espionage, personifying 'the new New Woman in the twenty-first century economies of white-collar labour' (White 2007, 126) and McRobbie's 'can-do' girl of post-feminism (2009, 72–83). An Alpha female born into a post-feminist realm of apparent feminist successes, Sydney is well educated, productive, and full of economic capacity – she is the visibly privileged female subject of neoliberal economies (McRobbie 2009, 73–5). In fact, Sydney is precisely what the feminist 'Laura' wanted Ally McBeal to be: healthy in mind and body.

The development of the myth's themes with the epistemological question of the post-feminist impasse – feminine identity – is strong throughout the series. As with Persephone, Sydney regularly traverses underworld and upper realms in her function as a secret agent, switching effortlessly between her 'fresh-faced' persona as Sydney, graduate student, and her complicated double agent status in the criminal underworld. Crossing this threshold marks Sydney's identity as a signifier recognized by others; like Korê, when Sydney returns from the underworld, she is not the same girl. In fact, Sydney literally dies several times throughout the five seasons ('Conscious' 3.9, 'Reprisal' 5.16, and 'A Man of His Word' 4.9), and she goes through several *symbolic* death and rebirth cycles. At the end of the second season Sydney's death is convincingly faked and, for two years, she lives under the alias Julia Thorn (see 'The Telling'

2.22, 'The Two' 3.1, and 'Full Disclosure' 3.11). Yet this only repeats the original death of Korê/Sydney in the pilot episode ('Truth Must Be Told') when she discovers all she knows of her life is based on lies such that there appears nothing authentic upholding the signifier 'Sydney.' Her search into the circumstances of the origins of her desire and body beneath this signifier animates the debates foreclosed in post-feminism over feminine identity.

The other characters in the myth central to Sydney's exploration of post-feminist Persephone themes – Hades, Demeter, and Zeus – are clearly present in Arvin Sloan, Laura Bristow/Irina, and Jack Bristow. Arvin Sloane's function as a Hades figure is strongly invoked as Jack's long-time fraternal conspirator and ruler of the criminal underworld: he becomes immortal by discovering the elixir for eternal life, before, poetically, becoming trapped eternally in an underground tomb ('All The Time in the World' 5.17). As Sydney learns the truth of her mother Laura's existence as Irina Derevko, she uncovers the lost, archaic mother in an image of the grain or seed goddess – as one whose power over life and death is capable of global devastation, the 'awesome goddess' Demeter (Foley 1999, line 1). As with Demeter, whose origins are in Indo-Europe (Suter 2005, 149–68), Irina – originally from Russia – spent significant time in the Indo-European continent (see 'The Passage, Part 1' 2.8 and 'The Passage, Part 2' 2.9), before arriving in the West and inserting herself into its established culture. In addition, Irina has her young daughter (Nadia) stolen from her and disguises herself by metaphorically 'draw[ing] a veil' over her identity (line 197) during Nadia's absence, known only as 'The Man' in the criminal underworld (see 'Almost Thirty Years' 1.22 and 'The Enemy Walks In' 2.1). Irina is also aligned with Jack, the eminent Zeus figure, whose role in Sydney's recruitment by Sloane Sydney incrementally uncovers throughout all five seasons.

Like the analysand in the psychoanalytic clinic then, the pilot episode presents a symptom – Sydney's identity (consent and desire) – that seeks a cure. Opening on the fallout from Sydney's discovery that her transition from Korê to Persephone was produced on a lie, the incoherent assemblage of 'Sydney' presented – aggressive, radical, resistant Sydney, and fresh-faced *Felicity*-like Sydney (Kackman 2005, 182) – does not coalesce until the end of the episode.[2] And, though the episode finishes back at the original scene, explaining how Sydney 'came to be' in this situation, the question of who Sydney *is*, is not resolved until the final episode of the series. As Sydney discovers her father is also a spy for the CIA functioning as a double agent embedded in SD-6, she must ask

how he allowed her recruitment into this corrupt world (why would Zeus give Persephone to Hades? Did Persephone go willingly?). Several episodes later Sydney learns that her mother was not Laura Bristow, literature professor, but is Irina Derevko, a KGB spy sent to steal secrets from a high-ranking CIA officer, inspiring the origin question, of whether Sydney was born as part of an elaborate charade, or as the product of her mother's desire. The narrative thus enters into a process of storytelling that Doane has described as the 'mise-en-scene of memory' (1987, 48). What is 'known' of Sydney's origins is revisited and retold numerous times throughout the series as, in Brooks' terms, the narrative seeks a cure to the symptoms presented. For Brooks, the 'death of the plot,' like the end of analysis, can only take place,

> after the text has remembered and worked through its own original and repressed secrets and traumas. Narrative middles repeat and replay lost time, delaying ending of the plot, in an attempt to gain knowledge and understanding of the relations of origins to desire and to the ends of desire. (1994, 6)

As Sydney's narrative takes on an investigative structure, the series produces narrative doubles and doppelgangers to allow Sydney to interrogate periods of 'lost time' in her past, examining the 'repressed secretes and traumas' by proxy as it were, until Sydney has established her relation to origins and desire. In fact, so dense is the articulation of the Persephone complex in *Alias*, one could treat each episode as analytic session where both Sydney and the viewer 'attempt to gain knowledge' of the symptom (Sydney's identity). In addition, much exposition in the series, as Zinder observes (2007), uses the Homeric style of epic oral storytelling to refresh the audience's memory of the complex plot. Sydney's original account of her transition from Korê to an underworld Persephone figure – that she tells her fiancé, Danny, prior to learning the 'truth' of this story ('Truth Must Be Told' 1.1) – recalls the opening scenes of the *Hymn* in its epic style of oration.[3] The accompanying vignette depicts Sydney with hand outstretched to take a business card from the recruiter in a visual recall of Korê reaching out to pluck the narcissus flower, and it is a vignette invoked whenever Sydney must justify her existence as a spy or double agent (for example, 'Q & A' 1.17).

The story of Sydney in this oration, however, is the story of a question because the rupture in the pilot episode has exposed the signifier of 'Sydney' as an illusion. Žižek notes that when history is ruptured by the 'advent of a new master-signifier, [it] changes retroactively the

meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, [and] makes it readable in another, new way' (2008b, 58). The rupture of Sydney's history enforces this retroactive 'restructuring' and, from the second episode onwards, the series opens with Sydney's emphatic statement, 'My name is Sydney Bristow' as if to defend the importance of the signifier despite what is unknown about it. The analogy here is that post-feminist sensibilities 'radically alter' the *feminist* history of the past, or at least, challenge the discarding of patriarchy by re-adopting themes associated with it. In *Alias*' early episodes, for example, Sydney expresses a feminist resentment toward the 'paternal metaphor' of Zeus/Jack in retrospective fantasies of the 'perfect' lost mother 'Laura'; Jack's function as father up to this point has been negligent (hiring nannies to raise her), but his reintroduction into Sydney's life radically alters her 'narration of the past' and intervenes into Sydney's Imaginary identification with her mother. Sydney wistfully believes if her mother had not died, 'she would have been my best friend' ('Blood Ties' 3.20), articulating Rich's longing for the pre-Symbolic Demeter. Because Sydney is an adult, however, Jack's re-signification (as spy) has the opposite effect of pushing the narrative toward radical psychosis, for the veracity of *all* signifiers are brought under suspicion with the revelation of Jack's 'real' identity: spy, double agent, and, as the series unravels, the architect of Sydney's life. In order for Sydney to re-symbolize herself ('the narration of the past') she must establish Jack's function with certainty and question her former idealization of her mother.

**Persephone's consent and post-feminist citizenship**

When Sydney questions whose consent lead her to enter the espionage underworld (Sloane's, Jack's, or her own), she invokes the question of Persephone's consent debated in feminist scholarship, and the motif of 'false consciousness' emerging in feminist critiques of post-feminism. Because Persephone's consent is not explicit in the *Hymn*, scholarship has focused on her actions and the traditional motifs of Homeric poetry and ancient Greek culture that signify intent. Much attention (for example, Agha-Jaffar 2002, 66–7), is given to the language surrounding Persephone's eating of the 'honey-sweet pomegranate seed' that Hades 'stealthily' slips into her mouth (lines 371–4), and Suter observes (2005, 84) that picking flowers with other girls is the traditional activity of young women before marriage. Moreover, the narcissus that Korê picks is described as a 'lovely toy' (line 16), suggesting that when Korê reaches out to pluck it (destroying it), she signals she is ready to give up childhood and be initiated as an adult woman (Suter 2005, 56, 76). Though

already an adult, Sydney confesses to her fiancé in the pilot she was looking for something to 'give [her] life meaning' such that she consents to become an underworld figure but is not privy to all consequences of this decision and, as in the *Hymn*, recovery of the scene is essential to discharge textual desire.

The link between Sydney's Persephone-status and post-feminist citizenship manifests in the pilot episode, where Sydney's espionage work depicts a glowing image of career success and satisfaction. Sydney performs her spy masquerade – smoothly networking a cocktail party in fluent Mandarin – before stealing into the laboratory to gather intelligence, where her improvised escape is given an air of thrilling excitement. The message is clear: Sydney not only consents, she enjoys. Educated and gainfully employed, Sydney embodies McRobbie's 'can do' girl of post-feminism: 'strategically endowed' with 'degrees of capacity' Sydney is invited to come forward as a visibly 'privileged subject' of feminism's successes (2009, 54–93). As Agha-Jaffar notes, Persephone is offered an equally attractive opportunity for, prior to her abduction, Persephone is simply known as Korê, 'a young virginal non-entity […] whose only claim to fame is that she is her mother's daughter' (2002, 49). *Alias* draws these two elements into a dual narrative image when Sloane offers Sydney the opportunity to be one of post-feminism's 'privileged subjects': as a spy, Sydney leads an exciting lifestyle of international travel. She contributes to something that matters – 'saving the world' – as well as gaining an income that provides for an enviable apartment and, importantly for Sydney, continued education. As the parallel depiction of Nadia's recruitment reiterates, Sloane has offered Sydney 'a life you could never imagine' ('The Orphan' 4.12), something echoed when Irina (generationally second wave) explains to Sydney that she joined the KGB because, 'for a *woman* to be asked to serve her country … it was a *future*: it meant empowerment, independence' ('The Abduction' 2.10).[4] Like Korê accepting the pomegranate seed, Sydney accepts her new position as Persephone, Queen of the (criminal) underworld where, as Hades tells Korê, she 'will have power over all that lives and moves,/and you will possess the greatest honors among the gods' (lines 365–6).

The question of Sydney's consent plays into the fundamental question of the series over identity because it introduces uncertainty over her status as a subject *capable* of consenting, or as an object of exchange between her father and others in the spy world. Allegorically, Sydney's 'false consciousness' as a spy dramatizes feminist anxiety over young women's consent to post-feminist sensibilities, seen as 'resurgent patriarchy' in disguise (McRobbie 2009, 85). Jack initially admits he allowed

Sydney's recruitment because he could not intervene without revealing his own spy activities ('The Confession' 1.11) – an excuse repeatedly returned to. As Brooks notes, the desired 'full utterance' of the text occurs when 'the relationship between narrative and truth' are clear and conclusive (1985, 234), and the repetitive return to this question nominates it as an encounter with the narrative symptom in the text. During Sydney's interrogation as The Chosen One her interrogators ask why Jack would 'recruit his daughter into that environment?' Sydney defensively reassures herself 'he wouldn't, *he didn't* [...] It was Sloane's idea to bring me in. He didn't tell my father until after I was active' ('Q & A' 1.17). The uncertainty nevertheless pushes Sydney to re-examine the motivations of others in the Oedipal triangulation of her Persephone complex.

The *mise en scène* of the traditional espionage plot – isolating authentic identities, alliances, and motivations – thus takes on the quality of 'familial longing' (Kackman 2005) in *Alias*, as Sydney reworks her family romance to locate the real identity of her parents. Early on Jack exists as an emotionally disenfranchised father to Sydney, with no apparent value, as she believes she has carved out her own future. A common variant, as Freud observes, in the subject's *fantasy* family romance is to demote one's parents to the status of foster parents in the discovery (or belief) of real biological parents who are superior, 'aristocratic,' and noble (SE9, 240). Yet this imaginative restructuring draws on the subject's early experiences and memories of the real parents, so that the fantasy of aristocratic heritage is 'derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble' parents (SE9, 240).

By exposing Sydney's original family romance as a fiction, *Alias* establishes Sydney's real parents beneath this fiction *as* noble, aristocratic figures. Sydney discovers Jack is, like descriptions of Zeus, commanding and 'aloof' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 99). Jack controls the narrative action – saving Sydney's life on several occasions (see 'Truth Must Be Told' 1.1, 'Mea Culpa' 1.9, 'Q & A' 1.17, 'The Enemy Walks In' 2.1, 'Breaking Point' 3.8, 'Conscious' 3.9, and 'All the Time In the World' 5.17) – as well as the narrative *vision*, watching Sydney on mission through hidden cameras and directing other CIA agents around her. He corrupts visual footage of Sydney-as-Julia Thorne to protect her from imprisonment and, as the document in Wittenberg reveals, Sydney's entire life is part of a CIA project (project 47), of which Jack is 'project manager' ('Resurrection' 3.22 and 'Authorized Personnel Only 1' 4.1). After working with him 'in the field,' Sydney develops an awed respect for Jack's spy skills – 'He was a pro, you know?' ('The Confession' 1.11). In keeping with these

discoveries, Sydney begins to recall images from childhood of Jack's strength, such as the time he carried her many miles during a family camping trip, where Sydney fondly imagined 'he was the strongest man in the world' ('Masquerade' 1.18). These memories, as Freud suggests, denote the use of real memory in the construction of a fantasy family romance, demonstrating a 'longing for the happy, vanished days when [her] father seemed to [her] the noblest and strongest of men and [her] mother the dearest and loveliest of women' (SE9, 241).

The instability of Jack's 'real' identity and subsequent function as the paternal signifier is maintained until the series has processed the key debates foreclosed in post-feminist cultures, specifically, as I outline in the final section, until Sydney's fantasies of returning to the (pre-Symbolic) mother are worked through. This uncertainty nevertheless allows for feminist readings of post-feminist sensibilities as 'false consciousness' to be articulated. When Sydney recovers the memory of Jack training her as a child to become a sleeper agent for the CIA ('Project Christmas') she is devastated to realize her success as an agent and contract with Sloane was not of her own making, as she charges Jack, 'you took away my choices in life!' ('The Indicator' 2.5).[5] Jack's 'hard-wiring' of Sydney to be an agent – a turn of phrase recalling Ally's statement on being 'wired to want what we really don't want' (see *Ally McBeal* 'Worlds Without Love' 2.6) – animates claims that post-feminist culture is a patriarchal 'con-trick': as if Jack prepared Sydney to accept 'the honey-sweet pomegranate seed' that Sloane/Hades 'stealthily slipped' into her mouth.

The particularly fantastic circumstances of *Alias*' science-fantasy espionage world allow Sydney to investigate her Persephone complex and the sensitive material therein via fantasies foreclosed in more realist genres. Jack's (and Victor Garber's) inscrutability makes him a blank canvas onto which Sydney both projects her fears and plays out her fantasies. Moreover, whenever Sydney uncovers new evidence casting doubt over Jack's motives, the text frequently follows the disclosure with a forced fantasy scene of the perfect family romance via the espionage plot, allowing Sydney to question Jack's agenda in the fantasy of 'what isn't there, what can never *directly* be seen' (Cowie 1997, 127–8; emphasis original). After learning Jack trained her to be a spy at age six, for instance, Sydney and Jack are immediately sent on a mission where Sydney must pose as a loving daughter donating a kidney to her adoring father so as to infiltrate a secure medical facility ('Salvation' 2.6).

As with the Bristow family romance in 'The Passage 1 & 2' (2.8 and 2.9), and 'Maternal Instinct' (5.11), these scenarios play out Oedipal

moments lost, or perhaps repressed, from Sydney's consciousness. While Angelini suggests this technique deepens the humanization of each character – where they 'better reconcile earlier mistakes' (2007, 35) – they force Sydney to confront Jack's function as the father at the precise moment she most wishes to reject him, as feminists reject Zeus' role in the *Hymn*. Rose notes the function of the father, as the 'paternal metaphor,' is a literal metaphor, for the *function* of the father in the Oedipal dyad is one of substitution, where the phallus is a signifier that 'stands in' (1992, 38). Jack's mantra that 'a satisfying lie can do more good than the awful truth' ('The Awful Truth' 4.3) also attempts substitution – the Symbolic function he cannot adequately enforce for Sydney, who remains caught in the Imaginary of her mother-daughter drama.

The dramatic espionage backdrop – where Sydney's identity is a matter of life-and-death – effectively disguises these Oedipal fantasies and questioning without inviting censure or ridicule for engaging with material foreclosed in post-feminist debates. This is evident nowhere more so than 'Mirage' (4.18), where, via an elaborate spy-scenario, Sydney returns to the scene of Jack and Laura/Irina's spy-marriage to stand in place of her mother as Jack's wife.[6] As the scene plays out, Jack's hallucinatory state allows him to believe it is 1981, and that Sydney is her mother, 'Laura.' Ostensibly staged to extract the details of Doctor Liddell's location to find a cure for Jack's (fatal) illness, the fantasy provides Sydney with the unconscious desire for the paternal metaphor. Jack confesses that, as a consequence of the mission, he will have to miss (child) Sydney's birthday and instead of ending the charade, Sydney lingers in this reconstruction of the past to tearfully assure Jack 'Sydney' will 'understand.' When Jack tells her he wants to quit the CIA, because 'Sydney is more important' Sydney's anguished satisfaction is palpable when she tells him 'just saying that means more than anything.' Furthermore, when Jack asks how she can 'be the perfect mother, a beautiful wife, all at once, just by standing there?' the erosion of kinship structures creates an uncanny moment. As Jack moves to play the piano with child Sydney, adult Sydney is granted a fantasy of what 'can never be': witness to herself as object of his desire in a doubled spectrum of wife and daughter. Through these seemingly benign fantasies, the series explores what is unconscious in debates about feminine identity and Persephone both: the function of the father.

The way in which these erotic connotations in 'Mirage' (4.18), as with Sydney's sexuality more generally, are taken for granted, draws attention to the specifically Oedipal aspect of the Persephone myth that animates processes of feminine identity. Brown and Abbott argue that

Sydney's normally 'erotic' alias is absent in this fantasy (2007, 95) in favour of a domestic wife persona of floral dress and frumpy cardigan. Prior to the staging of the scene, Vaughn (Michael Vartan) jokingly assures Sydney he will pull her out if things get 'awkward' a quip that avoids confronting what is taking place: the fantasy of supplanting one's mother and becoming one's father's wife (see SE16b, 333).

As Kulish and Holtzman suggest (2008, 87), the Persephone myth also narrates the adolescent process of finding a suitable substitute object for the father, yet much of Sydney's Persephone story remains in the *pre*-Oedipal phase of the mother-daughter drama where entrance of the father and a new object can create anxiety regarding the girl's loyalty toward the mother/first object. The daughter's rivalry with the mother depicted in the *Hymn*, nevertheless, underlies the return to Oedipal desires (staged in *Alias*), in adolescence – a theme developed at length in the following two chapters. But in *Alias*, as with post-feminism, these themes remain unconscious. At 27, Sydney is already sexually active, and the explicit sexual performances of her spy masquerade almost never inspire fear of sexual danger. References to Sydney's sexuality rarely emerge at all except, as Finding and MacLachlan note (2007, 79–80), in 'Search and Rescue' (4.21) when Vaughn reveals that Sydney is 'rough' in bed. The creators pull back from this moment, notably, to point to the person with whom sexual tension *is* felt – Jack – as the exchange takes place via remote communication that Jack interrupts to remind them he can hear. Similarly, in 'Double Agent' (2.14) a camera is planted in Sydney's bedroom that records her sexual relationship with Vaughn, and Jack destroys this footage (2.16 'Firebomb'), hinting at anxiety over representing and repressing this aspect of Sydney's Persephone story. When Jack interrogates Simon Walker (Justin Theroux), with whom Sydney-as-Julia was involved during her lost years, for instance, Walker confesses Sydney was the 'wildest girl I ever had' ('Repercussions' 3.5), and Jack shoots him before he can reveal any more uncomfortable details. Moreover, Sydney and Jack's forced intimacy as double agents at SD-6 create regular secret assignations fraught with the uncanny erotic undercurrents of the family romance.

I suggest the suppression of Sydney's sexuality is an effect of Sydney's crisis of identity, as she is fascinated with recovering and returning to the pre-Oedipal mother – a relation prior to the symbolization of sexual difference – as I discuss in the final section. For it is *this* relationship into which Jack's function as the father intervenes. Jack is certainly more faithful than Vaughn after Sydney's faked death ('The Two' 3.1), suggesting he would like to supplant Vaughn, but he is also relentless

in his attempts to keep Sydney from reuniting with her mother (in particular, 'Dead Drop' 2.4 and 'The Indicator' 2.5). Because such psychoanalytic questions of feminine identity are no longer 'viable' in post-feminism, the narrative must sublimate the effect of such exploratory fantasies, as shown above. Finding and MacLachlan (2007) argue the 'dark' side of Sydney's sexuality associated with Walker – that Sydney herself has repressed through her memory erasure ('Full Disclosure' 3.11) – is one complication too many for the already dense plot. Instead, Sydney's 'purity' is constantly re-affirmed (Finding and MacLachlan 2007, 74–81), leaving the audience free to enjoy the fun, playful aspects of her overtly sexual spy masquerades – what Schubart dubs the 'mission masquerade' (2007a, 216). It is this masquerade, however, that underpins questions of Sydney's consent, for it signifies the uncanny return in Genz's gothic monster (2007), of past femininities associated with patriarchy and, consequently, of post-feminism's 'false consciousness.'

## The (Real) body of Sydney Bristow, and 'the woman here depicted'

Sydney's Persephone figure is born into a crisis of competing epistemological systems of representation that impose meaning onto the Real (matter) of her body. As I show here, where *Alias* juxtaposes Sydney's conspicuously constructed 'mission masquerade' with the essential body of Rambaldi's 'woman here depicted' it clearly animates the impasse in feminisms over feminine identity. Where this is crystallized in debate over the action heroine's physical violence, Hills observes, the action heroine presents 'a methodological crisis for feminist film theory' by disturbing the 'binaristic logic' of traditional feminine/masculine gendered characteristics (1999, 39). As crime-fighting action heroine at the centre of a family melodrama, Sydney represents a new archetype in popular culture (Barnes 2007; White 2007) – what Genz identifies as the 'Supergirl' – 'a complex composite persona' 'whose identifications involve a continuous play between passivity and activity, vulnerability and strength' (2009, 33). Schubart nevertheless argues the 'Daddy's Action Girl' archetype (2007a, 196–8), which Sydney personifies, stages 'the recurring question' of 'how did she become this way?' implying that the action heroine's physicality and violence is an *un*natural attribute that requires she be educated in the performance of feminine masquerade to cover over it.[7] Sydney's location amidst competing epistemologies of meaning does pose a question, but not how she came to be unnaturally 'masculine' or physical; rather, I argue, Sydney's question

is how she became Persephone in an underworld that situates her at the *centre* of the post-feminist impasse.

In fact, in response to these competing epistemologies, Sydney maintains a belief in an authentic self where, despite the brainwashing efforts of The Covenant, 'I would still be me' ('Remnants' 3.10); consequently, Sydney's body, like the hysteric's, becomes 'a manuscript to be read for the symptoms that betray her story, her identity' (Doane 1987, 43). Here, her body assumes the status of a symptom, and the fantasy of comprehending and signifying the Real of Sydney's body denotes, I suggest, what Lacan describes as the 'trauma of the Real' (SXI, 55): the trace of an encounter with the Real not fully mastered in the Symbolic and remembered in symptom form as affect. In this way, the series produces a fantasy of the Real of the woman's body as a traumatic remainder not mastered in feminist debates over feminine identity.

Though tempting to link this fantasy of the Real woman's body to the threat of essentialism in Rambaldi's 'woman here depicted,' in this section I show how such a reading overlooks the Judeo Christian values informing Rambaldi's work and, comparatively, where it informs feminist work. For the impact of Judeo Christian values (as discussed in Chapter 1), *displace* multiple feminine deities of Hellenic religions for the binary represented in *Alias*' post-feminist impasse. Here, debates over the heroine's identity – as violent 'masculine' heroine, as false-conscious feminine 'masquerade,' or as an 'essential female body' – expose a presupposition in feminist critiques regarding the woman as 'good' or 'bad' – as a 'progressive' or 'negative' image of the woman in culture (Cowie 1997, 38). The Real body of the woman that persists in *Alias* shows us where foreclosures of the Real based on *essentialist* arguments are, in effect, conflating Christian values (connoted in Rambaldi) with the totalizing values of 'patriarchy' and the paternal metaphor. In this, the Real body of the woman remains unaccounted.

**Mission masquerade and the Real**

Sydney's 'mission masquerade' is entirely self-conscious and not, within the narrative, articulated as her authentic self. Indeed, as a narrative device, it presents a well-known trope that, like the tropes of melodrama, present something with 'direct comprehensibility and recognizability' for the audience, forming 'the basis for the pleasure of many faithful viewers' (Ang 1985, 65). Tasker observes that masquerade functions 'as a fairly straightforward voyeuristic strategy for showcasing the body of the star/performer' (1998, 94) where, Coon suggests (2005), Sydney's masquerade is a simple ploy for network ratings – that is, pure titillation.

This entertaining ploy is part of the *narrative* rationale for Sydney's use of the masquerade also. As Sydney schools protégé Rachel Gibson (Rachel Nichols), through her first performance as a sex-worker ('Solo' 5.6), Rachel panics and slaps her target in the face. Instead of retribution, the client laughs, revealing his penchant for sadomasochistic play, and Sydney tells Rachel 'this is going to be too easy.' Indeed, the narrative *excess* of this clichéd plot device (that the series became known for) functions explicitly within the terms of post-feminist sensibilities, for as Brooks notes, 'even when it is somewhat campy' postmodern 'citation[s] of past systems of meaning' can still excite precisely *because* they plays with systems of meaning (1994, ix).

Sydney's contract with the underworld denotes her consent to reprise and perform a specifically *feminine* masquerade for her underworld Hades. Sydney performs what will be 'culturally intelligible' (Butler 2008, 2011) as 'woman' within the frameworks of post-feminist culture, articulating a poststructuralist feminist position on 'femininity' as constructed through performance. Notably, Sydney never masquerades as a man, lesbian, sexually ambiguous, or transgender figure; like Nikita, her masquerades are conspicuously white, affluent, and heterosexual (Tung 2004).[8] Even so, while all of Sydney's masquerades are of 'woman,' in many instances she performs what Ussher calls 'resisting girl' (1997, 355) by performing aliases that are vulgar, grotesque, or rebellious: the pregnant gambler, the punk, or the obnoxiously loud, gum-chewing Southerner. These personas clarify what is accepted as 'woman' within the populist norms of American network television where, White observes (2007, 85), television 'panders' to female consumer fantasies of 'affluence, beauty and glamour' because women are the primary audiences attracting advertisers.

Yet in contrast to the theory of masquerade in psychoanalysis, Sydney does not *identify* with her feminine performance. As Ragland points out, 'masquerade' is produced via identification with the 'imaginary ideals' of the Symbolic; it is not a pathological identification but, rather, a structure of 'desire that joins mind and body' based on how 'sexual difference is interpreted' (2004, 1). Thus, masquerade is Symbolic *identification* with sexual difference. When Lacan reformulates Freud's work through linguistics, he distinguishes the Real body from the Imaginary and Symbolic identifications of the subject toward this body. Here, language symbolizes through the substitution of a sign for the Real object and, as such, 'the ego and its identifications' are Imaginary symbolizations that 'stand in' for the Real (Rose 1992, 31). Though the Real body *exists* it cannot be signified, for as soon as it is, it becomes exchanged for

the sign ('meaning'), and becomes absent 'designating an object in its absence' (Rose 1992, 31).

It is this exchange of the Real into the Symbolic and Imaginary realms of culture, or, more particularly, the epistemologies of meaning through which the Real body is recognized, underpinning the post-feminist impasse. As Ragland-Sullivan observes (1986, 376), feminist attempts to 'extol' the Real female body into theory and representation – such as Irigaray's insistence on symbolizing female genitalia in the cultural Imaginary (1985b, 1993a, b, c) – overcome the absence of the Real body by confusing it with biology (Ragland-Sullivan 1992b, 375–6). Butler's poststructuralist intervention, that the body – in so far as it exists in the Real – is always already signified through the discursive practices and technologies that institute and maintain (hegemonic, hetero) sexual difference in language (2011, xiii), denotes the structural 'repudiation' of the body in feminist theory more generally (Wilson 2010, 200). Identifying with a sexed position (masculine or feminine) 'qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility,' but such intelligibility is, for Butler, imposed *on* the Real by culture (2011, xiii), and is not an *interpretation* of the Real body. Here, Butler's work appears manifest in the articulation of identity in *Alias*' espionage world, where the 'materiality of the body' is 'a *sign* which in its redoublings and contradictions enacts an inchoate drama of sexual difference' (2011, 22).

Where feminist cultural criticism debates masquerade, in contrast, they touch on genre as gender ('woman as method'), and invoke questions of masquerade as covering over an 'essential' difference. On one hand, Schubart argues (2007b, 34), heroines who masquerade mark an essential 'truth' of 'female nature' through the distinction of their 'real self' (the fresh-faced Sydney) from the feminine performance. Mizejewski, on the other, argues that the 'bikini assignment' – a form of mission masquerade given to the female cop/detective/spy in popular culture – *re*asserts the heroine's status as a 'natural woman' despite her 'unnatural' professionalism (2004, 59) thus animating the artificial construction of gender-as-essential under patriarchy. For Tasker, similarly, masquerade 'signals' the heroine's 'problematic location within the force' (1998, 94), constructing a tension between 'working women' and women's work: costume, dress, and uniform are synonymous with the production of femininity but also 'working women' such as sex-workers. When Sydney masquerades as a sex-worker ('Phase One' 2.13), for example, she plays out her own contract to use her body for financial reward and thus *mirrors* the 'sex-for-work dynamic' of her alias (Finding and MacLachlan 2007, 77). For these feminist critiques, masquerade functions, as Rivière

theorized (1991, 94), as a disguise for the 'guilty' possession of masculinity associated with the woman's professional place in the traditional male role/genre.

We can see, here, the essentialism of the 'woman as genre' critique is linked to an inheritance of Judeo Christian values, for other female deities of ancient Greek theology were known for a variety of attributes – physical (Artemis) and intellectual (Athena) as well as erotic (Aphrodite). But these qualities are lost in Judeo Christian eras, where they appear as exclusive male *or* female characteristics. Sydney's physical violence recalls Agha-Jaffar's analysis of Persephone using the rhetoric of post-feminism when she states that, in choosing to remain in the underworld, Persephone 'transcends her victim status and becomes the powerful and empowered queen of the underworld – a "kick ass" survivor' (2002, 50). This kick-ass quality is evident in many post-feminist Persephone heroines – Nikita, Buffy, and Xena to name but a few – but the 'authentic' status of these heroines *as* heroic is questioned as simply mimicking the hero: a 'figurative male' (Hills 1999, 39), effected through a 'hard bodied,' 'muscular' physique – what Tasker calls 'musculinity' (1995).

In *Alias*, the clearly artificial quality of Sydney's mission masquerade hides her spy identity, double-agent status, and 'grad-student' identities such that it introduces a question regarding which of these identities is the more authentic, and less performative. The question of which of Sydney's aliases *are* aliases, would seem to articulate feminist conceptions of identity as *purely* constructed through, in Butler's terms, the 'acts' and 'gestures' of a performance 'manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (2008, 185). But the *mission* masquerade places Sydney within the visual frame reminiscent of what Doane describes as 'overpresence' (1987, 12) where her image is reproduced through multiple surveillance techniques designed to 'capture' identity: security cameras, satellite images, x-rays, iris scans, and even 500 hundred year old drawings all attempt to isolate Sydney's *body* for identification. The series constructs a 'scopophilic pleasure' (White 2007, 127) in monitoring this overpresence by her SD-6 partner Dixon and CIA handler Vaughn and, of course, Jack, in a voyeuristic frame that invites viewers to scrutinize Sydney's performance for an 'essential kernel of truth which attempts to escape the eye' (Doane 1987, 40). Such techniques invoke a mixture of pleasure and anxiety, for the fatal consequences of exposing Sydney's identity remind us that masquerade in *Alias* covers over the fundamental crisis of Sydney's 'authentic self' beneath this performance. Where, as Wright suggests (2001, 42), 'Masquerade exemplifies the failure of the real to match the symbolic,'

it might therefore be thought of in *Alias* as a symptom – the trauma of the Real body in the post-feminist impasse.

Feminist literary studies has also questioned whether the classical 'hero's journey' befits female experience and, subsequently, can constitute a heroine's journey (see, in particular, Abel et al, 1983; Murdock 1990). A popular hypothesis is that the heroine's journey is an interior journey (Hirsch 1983), as Creed theorizes in her cinematic 'Neo-Myth' for women (2007). Like Agha-Jaffar's reading of the Persephone myth as psychic transition toward a new identity (2002), Creed's Neo-Myth features a series of internal or psychic phenomena expressed through external progress. Angelini observes this in Sydney's violence where, for example, the 'internal exploration' of Sydney's 'inner life' (reminiscent of Ally's 'inner states') distinguishes *Alias* from the 'external dynamism of the traditional espionage' quest narrative (2007, 28). Yet, as Finding and MacLachlan suggest (2007, 75), Sydney's physicality in defending the integrity of her body denotes the significance of the body as the one constant amongst her multiple identities. I suggest here the ritual enactment of Sydney's 'physical integrity' functions in direct relation to the crisis between the Real of her body and the economies of meaning that are imposed on it in the question of her Symbolic existence. For the frequent spectacle of Sydney's convulsing body under torture invokes a visual paranoia over a potential 'truth' located in or on Sydney's body.[9] That is, despite the projection of several epistemologies *onto* Sydney's body, as Creed notes (2007, 19), no heroine can completely remove herself from the Real of her sexed body. Indeed, even when ignored, its existence remains 'a residual weight in the real that appears in the imaginary as an inert burden' (Ragland 2004, 149). In *Alias*, this burden appears in the Imaginary through Rambaldi, whose Christocentric essentialism animates feminist fear of biological essentialism upon which they foreclose the Real – a rejection of Freud's 'anatomy is destiny' (SE19, 248–58).

**Rambaldi and the 'woman here depicted'**

The Rambaldi plot, Zinder observes (2007, 48), situates Sydney's image of Persephone in tension with a Christ myth, for references to both Sydney and her sister Nadia in Rambaldi's prophecy strongly evoke Judeo Christian iconography. A (fictional) architect of the papacy in the fifteenth century, Rambaldi is clearly modelled on Leonardo Da Vinci (Zinder 2007, 48), and claims 'that one day science would allow us to know God' ('Parity' 1.3). One of Sydney's functions as The Chosen One is to give birth to Rambaldi's child, a 'Second Coming' ('Full Disclosure'

3.11), and followers of Rambaldi refer to meeting Nadia as 'like meeting the Virgin Mary' ('The Descent' 4.20).[10] This places Sydney's body within a Christocentric epistemology of knowledge, producing the body of 'the woman here depicted' (potentially Sydney) as dangerous and the object of several 'witch hunts' (see 'The Solution' 1.20). In effect, the Rambaldi plot denotes woman's biology as both 'good' (reproductive) and 'evil' (destructive). Though Sydney is the vessel for Rambaldi's 'Second Coming' her body is simultaneously feared for its destructive potential as the prophecy reads that The Chosen One will 'Unless prevented, at vulgar cost [...] render the greatest power unto utter desolation' ('The Prophecy' 1.16). And though never literally raped, Sydney's body is physically and psychically penetrated without her consent in relation to Rambaldi (as The Chosen One will have biological 'anomalies' of 'DNA sequencing, platelet levels and the size of [her] heart'; see 'The Prophecy' 1.16), creating anxiety over her ability to protect the boundaries of her body – the referent for 'Sydney.'[11]

The gothic and melodramatic excesses of *Alias*' espionage plot situate the *process* of representation in the Symbolic function in crisis, specifically an anxiety in the visual realm that, I suggest, is a 'signal of the Real' (SX, 173). As a spy, Sydney exists in a paranoid realm where, as with fantastic gothic narratives, 'the very process of seeing' becomes 'invested with fear, anxiety, horror' for the signifiers have lost their connection to Symbolic reality and have become 'objectless [and], free-floating' (Doane 1987, 129). In her quest for identity, Sydney interrogates the signs of her existence for hidden meanings and coded signifiers (in particular, 'Prelude' 3.7) for she is in a narrative realm, as Jackson describes the fantastic, where '[p]erception becomes increasingly confused, signs are vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretation, so that "meanings" recede indefinitely, with "truth" as a mere vanishing point of the text' (1981, 38). Mercurial characters like Julian Sark (David Anders) elegantly illustrate the fragility of the signifier to fix identity. Because the visual is the privileged means of identifying 'truth' within surveillance in the espionage world, this instability of the visual frame produces high levels of anxiety. The image of The Chosen One on 'Page 47' of Rambaldi's prophecy is the legal evidence used to imprison Sydney ('The Prophecy' 1.16), yet the assurance of the visual frame is constantly broken. For within the science-fantasy parameters of *Alias*, biology is no longer a signifier of a *unique* identity. Neither fingerprints nor brain waves – 'a signature pattern as unique as a finger print' ('Blood Ties' 3.20) – are capable of securing identity, as each is replicable via technology. Similarly, uncanny doppelgängers such as Lauren Reed

(Melissa George), and Anna Espinoza (Gina Torres) function, as Freud notes of character doubles, to draw the subject 'uncannily' back to a period of development when the ego has not 'marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people' (SE17, 236). *Alias* thus plays with 'doubt' over which self is authentic – the interior self, or the external imago.[12]

The uncanny presence of Rambaldi's 'woman here depicted' that doggedly persists in identifying Sydney thus presents the Real body in a traumatic 'return of the repressed' cathected with a fantasy of symbolizing it. In the sense that the Lacanian concept of the Real is not an *object* but, rather, an *effect* 'unconsciously, intruding into our psychic reality' (Ragland-Sullivan 1986, 188) the Real is often only 'knowable in its effects: as the pain which inheres in a symptom' (Ragland-Sullivan 1986, 189). The fantasy of the Real body in *Alias* irrupts as the symptom of what is foreclosed in debates over the *construction* of feminine identity dramatized in Sydney's 'mission masquerade.'

Where the Rambaldi prophecy locates Sydney's identity in her body's biology, it invokes the often-misapplied Freudian phrase, 'anatomy is destiny.' As noted in Chapter 2, where feminist politics works to remove inequality based on 'anatomy,' it has clearly rejected Freud's work on the 'psychological consequences of the anatomical differences between the sexes' (SE19, 248–58). Yet as we saw with the impasse in *Ally McBeal*, this does not adequately account for the Real of sexual difference. Anxiety over Sydney's biological 'destiny' is similarly illustrated when Sydney's daughter Isabelle (Julia Di Angelo) displays an identical aptitude for the spy game as Sydney (see 'The Indicator' 2.5 and 'All the Time in the World' 5.17), *without* the benefit of Jack's 'hard wiring.' Though Jack's 'hard wiring' overlays Sydney's biology, the sense of 'Sydney' who is an amalgam of these elements is nevertheless found to be consistent. As Sydney tells Will (Bradley Cooper), even during her amnesia, she would 'still be "me"' ('Remnants' 3.10).

Sydney's bodily attributes of The Chosen One – an essential body capable of world destruction – allegorically recall the appropriation of the Real body of 'the woman' by Judeo Christian theology. Rambaldi replicates the reproductive body in devices like The Hourglass, The Box, The Sphere of Life, The Passenger, The Circumference, and The Flood, and Rambaldi objects, code-keys, documents, and instructions to unlocking their power, are all located in womb-like locations at the end of long passages or tunnels, beneath the earth and ocean, in basements, caves, and protected locations, recalling Persephone's descent into the underworld. As Suter argues, Persephone's annual return to Hades depicts

the union of a Fertility goddess with the earth in a ritual of sympathetic fertility magic (2005, 98). Indeed, there are several references to nine-month gestation periods in *Alias*: it takes Sydney nine months to resurface after her death (and rebirth as Julia Thorn), and nine months to find Rambaldi's DNA ('Full Disclosure' 3.11). The Mueller device or 'Circumference' and The Sphere of Life, are particularly evocative of womb and egg, and abortive attempts to harness their power evoke scenes of aborted fertility/menstruation. And Irina, as archaic (goddess) mother, is the only one capable of stopping her sister Yelena/Sophia from releasing 'the flood' that will cleanse the earth (apocalyptically), just as Demeter 'would have destroyed the whole mortal race' in her refusal to let the crops grow (line 310).[13] Where Irina guides Sydney through the safe dismantling the device, so its toxic contents become harmless water ('Before the Flood' 4.22), the danger of retrieving Rambaldi items connotes the 'dangers' of the female body in Christocentric ideology. Perilous locations reinforced with internal security systems can castrate (Lazeray's hand in 'Full Disclosure' 3.11), such that women are more successful at recovering the devices. Sydney is 'an in-house' celebrity at the CIA for her record number of acquisitions ('Full Disclosure' 3.11), while Nadia is the only one who can access The Sphere of Life and survive ('The Descent' 4.20).

And where the Rambaldi myth implies woman's knowledge of her reproductive (and erotic) body is dangerous, it connotes Judeo Christian attitudes towards women during the Middle Ages. The first lines of Rambaldi's prophecy state that 'This Woman, here depicted will possess unseen marks; signs that she will be the one to bring forth my works, bind them with fury, a burning anger' ('The Prophecy' 1.16). During the investigation into Sydney's body for signs she is The Chosen One the prophecy is referred to as '666,' a signifier of the devil (see 'The Prophecy' 1.16). This inquiry evokes the witch trials and inquisitions of the fifteenth century: as an interrogation (and dispossession) of women's knowledge of reproduction and the natural world. Sydney's resemblance to The Chosen One here, like the 'Sorceress' of the witch trial is proof of 'guilt' (Cixous and Clément 1991, 5–8).

Where the Rambaldi plot appears to 'determine' the Real body of 'the woman here depicted' as the essential body rejected by poststructuralist feminists, it confuses Judeo Christian values as the totalizing values of patriarchy. This confusion is evident early in second wave feminisms where, for instance, de Beauvoir makes little distinction between the displacement of the goddess (in pre-Homeric matriarchies) for the father's law ('patriarchy') and the usurping of polytheism

for Christianity's monotheism (1997, 97–128). Though de Beauvoir observes 'Christian ideology has contributed no little to the oppression of woman' (1997, 128), this is understood as a secondary injustice to woman's already unequal status with man under patriarchy. Indeed, de Beauvoir objects to the organizing principle of the Persephone myth that accords with Lévi-Strauss' theory that exogamy founds culture (de Beauvoir 1997, 105–6). Yet Freud points to the way Judeo Christian myth grafts onto the 'paternal metaphor' of patriarchy (see SE13, 1–162; SE23 1–137) such that it displaces polytheistic myths of the ancient Greeks (and other indigenous European religions) where female deities held significant status (see Themi 2014, 88–91). That is, it is not the patriarchal organization of culture that produces the woman's body as 'essentially' good or bad, but Christian values. As Themi (following Nietzsche) shows, the displacement of polytheism for Christian monotheism effects the final moments of a 'denaturalization' process, 'constituted by the perverse *physiological* effects' of repressing the Real of the drives where they are labelled by the Church as 'sin' (Themi 2014, 102). The Real body thus persists in presenting itself in *Alias* as an uncanny reminder (and remainder) of what is unaccounted for within either the epistemologies of Rambaldi or feminist poststructuralist thought that rejects the body where the 'matter' of sexual difference is, for Butler, 'a *sign*' (2011, 22).

Sydney's dream following her two-year amnesia ('The Telling' 2.22 and 'The Two' 3.1) dramatizes this traumatic return of the Real body. Sydney dreams herself in a locked hospital room where, reaching beneath a hospital gown she finds and fingers a gaping wound on her abdomen, a bloody gash visually reminiscent of a bleeding vagina. Sydney's confusion and horror as she gingerly inserts fingers into the wound recalls a young girl's discovery of her body – of her *sexed* body with its reproductive and erotic capacities. The dream denotes confusion over this sexed body as, at this point, the wound's history is unknown, and it is not the vagina. The scene cuts to Sydney's now bloodied fingers pulling out a long cord from the wound that endlessly spews onto the floor around her feet. The blood is suggestive of a miscarriage, yet the umbilical-like cord comes from Sydney's abdomen as if she were a child just born, recalling the scene of Sydney's awakening from her amnesia in an earlier episode. Damp and groggy, Sydney wakes in a foetal position in a back alleyway of Hong Kong – her mother's headquarters – and, like a new-born baby, awkwardly fingers the scar on her abdomen. Equally, however, Sydney is the bleeding woman and not the infant, alluding to the loss of distinction between the mother and daughter, between

Persephone and Demeter as different faces of the goddess, where 'she appears now as the one, now as the other' (Jung 1989, 145).[14]

The dream material alludes to the place of the Real in the formation of Imaginary and Symbolic identifications. For the image of Sydney as aborting and being aborted – as giving birth to herself – draws attention to the significance of the mother's body in the processes of identity: as a structural taboo against the Real necessary for Symbolic identity (Ragland-Sullivan 1992b, 377). The scar on Sydney's abdomen is found to be the Covenant's harvesting of Sydney's ovum to create a child with Rambaldi's DNA in a 'Second Coming'; thus, the wound is not that of the infant but of the mother's body – that which is necessarily repressed as the Real in order for the subject to be symbolized.

Never acknowledged in Sydney's narrative, the dream denotes the appropriation of goddess imagery associated with polytheistic religions by the Judeo Christian themes of Rambaldi. In medieval iconography of Christ on the cross, Hollywood observes (2004, 112), Christ's wound resembles a bleeding vagina, denoting the appropriation of woman's role as fertility divinities by the new religion. In contrast to earlier indigenous European religions where such female divinities existed, Christ's 'wound' becomes the source of life and the singular deity (Hollywood 2004, 121). Similarly, Agha-Jaffar notes that in Neolithic art that celebrates the goddess 'the central image was a female giving birth, not a male dying on the cross' (2002, 102). Sydney's dream articulates this shift in epistemology and its consequences for the woman: the fact that Sydney does not know (yet), the origins of the scar implies that Rambaldi's Christ myth has removed Sydney's knowledge of the Real of her sexed body from consciousness.

Sydney must protect her body (often violently) from those seeking to harness it while nevertheless establishing her identity in Symbolic terms with the Real of this (sexed) body. Yet her body cannot be isolated from other female bodies in the narrative that mirror her dilemma or, indeed, potentially *are* her, for the Rambaldi prophecy seeks to identify *a* woman, 'this woman here depicted.' Sydney must recover these women, then, to distinguish her body from them, particularly that of the 'original' woman: the mother.

## Demeter and the Persephone complex

Sydney is frequently identified through her visual likeness to Irina, epitomized in the image of The Chosen One where, as Sydney notes, 'my mum looked like that. Maybe that's a picture of my mother' ('The

Prophecy' 1.16).[15] Invoking the twin-like qualities of Persephone and Demeter after their reunion (Neumann 1974), visual twinning is echoed in shared characteristics that recall the two independent goddesses with similar stories prior to the *Hymn* (Suter 2005, 121). Though originally imitating 'Laura' by undertaking graduate school, Sydney unknowingly followed her mother into the spy world, and Sydney is often misrecognized *as* Irina because of their shared characteristics (see 'Trust Me' 2.2 and 'The Telling' 2.22): as one character tells Sydney, 'you know I knew your mother? […] a very charming, very disarming woman … who wasn't what she seemed' ('A Dark Turn' 2.17), an epitaph that is used to describe Sydney, as 'a very beautiful woman, who knows how to deceive' ('A Missing Link' 3.4).

The twinning of Sydney with Irina in visual, narrative, and symbolic motifs animates feminist and psychoanalytic readings of the Persephone-Demeter dynamic, underscoring both the fantasies and fears associated with the mother in each discourse. In particular, Irina invokes the unconscious ideas of the 'good'/'bad' mother in feminist literature that, I argue here, might be understood as the influence of Klein's work on the mother's body as 'good' or 'bad' objects in the child's fantasy life that has shaped feminist psychoanalytic work in the US. As Sydney works through her family romance, she confronts the Real mother beneath the fantasy she has built, telling Vaughn, 'there's this woman. A personality, like a collage I've put together, from the photographs, the few memories I have, the scraps of stories I've heard, the clothes of hers I've got, her books. None of it's real. She wasn't that woman at all' ('The Box, Part 1' 1.12). Sydney's attempts to rediscover her mother nevertheless denote both the fantasy of recovering the ancient goddess and the *anxiety* associated with a return to pre-Symbolic union with her – illustrating Freud's work on the *fort/da* game of symbolizing the presence and absence of the mother. The metaphor of the Rambaldi plot that requires Sydney distinguish herself from the mother's body, thus, reiterates the necessity of doing so in psychic terms, as returning to the pre-Symbolic mother threatens radical psychosis and, moreover, becoming the 'toy' of her mother's malignant desire.

**Recovering the goddess (and the Real body of the mother)**

The tension in Sydney's desire for but anxiety over finding her lost mother animates Klein's theory of the 'ideal' or 'persecutory' breast in the infant's fantasy life of its pre-Symbolic mother's body (1991[1936]) known as the 'good breast/bad breast' thesis. For Klein, the mother's body is the site onto which the child's fantasies are projected in early

Oedipal processes, where oral frustrations of satisfaction at the breast (and later toilette) inspire destructive and sadistic fantasies of destroying the mother's body that in turn produce excessive anxiety and guilt (see Klein 1945). On learning her mother was a spy, Sydney acknowledges her fantasy of 'Laura' as a 'good' mother is a fiction, and in her place is a 'bad' one, 'Irina,' who did not nourish Sydney enough (at least emotionally) by faking her own death. In discarding the fantasy of 'Laura,' however, Sydney begins a search for the fantasy of the Real (pre-Symbolic) mother that recalls Rich's attempt to 'reclaim the goddess' Demeter, a figure 'whose love for her [daughter] and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death (1986, 240). Indeed, where Irina is potentially The Chosen One, Sydney's search seeks the pre-Symbolic mother's body that, as the series plays out, is potentially both 'ideal' *and* 'persecutory.' Klein's theory inspired the development of psychoanalysis in the US where, as Whitford notes, it 'was a crucial enabling factor in feminist accounts of the mother-daughter relationship' (1992b, 192; see also Caputi 1993; Chodorow and Contratto 1989; Jacobs 2007). This influence, I suggest, underpins the drive in some feminist cultural criticism to seek either the progressive or negative image of 'the woman' in the text (Cowie 1997, 38) and informs latent anxieties in post-feminist discourses about the ideal or persecutory mother of feminism, expressed in *Alias* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Kulish and Holtzman critique Klein for 'telescoping' the conflicts of the Oedipal drama 'backwards into early infancy' (2008, 14), but maintain the importance of these conflicts in adolescence, as I develop in the following chapter. What *Alias* narrates, however, is the way in which Klein's emphasis on the mother forecloses the 'function of the father' where, as Lacan puts it, 'the mythic body of the mother' (SI, 106) is a fantasy in an Imaginary not relative to the Symbolic 'Name-of-the-Father' (E, 613).[16]

The fantasy of the mother in *Alias* begins with a play on her presence and absence in the visual narrative frame that recalls Freud's observations of the infant's *fort/da* Game (SE18, 7–64), in which the child symbolizes the presence or absence of the mother (and father) by tossing a cotton-reel on the end of a string out of sight and then pulling it back, thus expressing her absence *fort*! [gone] and presence *da!* [there] at will. For Freud (SE18, 17), this game enacts a 'mastery' of pleasure and its opposite, displeasure, originally experienced in the comings and goings of the mother the child cannot actually control. For Lacan, this moment is central to becoming a subject of language, for it is the moment that 'gives birth to the symbol' and what is symbolized in this game is the subject's desire – as constituted by the desire of the M/Other (see E,

100–1, 222–3). Irina's ritual appearance/disappearance in Sydney's life plays out this ontological process – beginning when Sydney recovers video footage of Irina after she is supposedly dead, placing the mother within the visual economy as evidence of her existence ('Snowman' 1.19).

Though *Alias* plays out the *fort/da* dynamic in the ritual recovery and repression of Irina, unlike the game, Sydney is *not* in control of Irina's comings and goings. Because it is the actual mother who comes and goes and not merely her symbolization, Sydney is made helpless in this drama, as Irina dictates her own (and Sydney's) symbolization by choosing when she will appear and when she will not. Suter observes that the 'basic pattern of the *Hymn* is Withdrawal and Loss' (2005, 49), much like the *fort/da* dynamic. Due to Zeus' intervention, Persephone masters the loss or absence of the mother in her annual return. Demeter, in her turn, masters her loss by the work of substitution. Initially, she repeats Persephone's story (of abduction and rape) as her own when she meets the daughters of Keleos (later substituting her loss with the baby Demophoön) but, ultimately, Demeter masters her loss by *symbolizing* Persephone's absence and return through the Eleusinian mysteries. Sydney, contrarily, never 'masters' the *fort/da* dynamic but remains caught in a pre-Symbolic fantasy (and fear) of the mother's return.

Where the return to the mother's body is a *necessity* (to establish the identity of 'the woman here depicted') Sydney confronts possible dissolution with the mother's body, visibly articulated in Rambaldi's 'page 47' image of The Chosen One: either Sydney or Irina. This fear is, Zinder observes (2007, 48–9), present early in the series when Jack dreams of Laura/Irina holding baby Sydney, only to have her dissolve into the image of Sydney holding a baby ('A Broken Heart' 1.4; see also 'Mirage' 4.18). Due to the age of the 'page 47' document and doubt over the identity of 'the woman here depicted,' the series presents an image of the archaic mother promised in the fantasy identification with her pre-Symbolic existence. As Sydney puts it, the woman in the picture is simply '*a* woman,' and 'millions of women have looked like that' ('The Prophecy' 1.16). The fixation with this image and more particularly, the 'overpresence' of both Sydney and Irina's face in the visual frame that seeks this lost identity is reminiscent of the fascination associated with the close-up image of the woman's face in beauty magazines. As Fuss argues, these images recall the lost mother of infancy, and offer potential 'restitution of the lost object' (1994, 217). For, following Kristeva, Fuss notes the mother's face in the pre-Symbolic 'still-to-be-gendered-subject'

becomes 'the first mirror image' of self – especially for a daughter where 'the mother's image is, simultaneously, her own' (1994, 217).

As with the question of Jack's role in organizing Sydney's life, Irina's desire for her daughter is one of the key questions Sydney's narrative seeks in order to re-symbolize 'the narration of the past' (Žižek 2008b, 58). Here, Irina is an object of intense visual scrutiny through which, as with Sydney's masquerade, the audience is encouraged to detect signs of Irina's true agenda, her 'unknown' desire.[17] Lacan argues that the mother's function in the life of the subject is precisely her desire (SXVII, 112) and, as with Ally McBeal's triangular situation, it is clear that Jack is not the one to mobilize Irina's desire (though Irina pretends so when it suits her). Consequently, Sydney must contend with the fantasy projections of the mother's desire unaided by the intervention of the father/phallus that cuts into this Imaginary drama. As Lacan puts it, the mother's desire 'will always wreak havoc' in its *potentiality*, invoking the metaphor of a 'huge crocodile in whose jaws you are' for one 'never knows what might suddenly come over her and make her shut her trap' (SXVII, 112). Such anxiety is present in Irina's 'unknown' motivations where, in stories of child Irina she was 'shameless' at stealing candy, for no one's authority has any meaning for Irina ('Pandora' 4.15). Irina's agenda is, thus, open to all manner of 'potentiality' for, as Katya (Isabella Rossellini) puts it 'when you least expect it, Irina's intentions will present themselves to you. And when that day comes, it will be unmistakable' ('Crossings' 3.12).

Irina presents a vengeful, 'persecutory' Demeter, full of wrath and distinctly infanticidal. When Sydney meets Irina (the 'bad' mother beneath the fantasy 'Laura') for the first time, Irina taunts 'I could have prevented all this of course. You were so small when you were born, it would have been so easy' ('The Enemy Walks In' 2.1). Irina then shoots Sydney and is later believed to have contracted Sydney's murder ('Authorized Personnel Only 2' 4.2 and 'Pandora' 4.15). Consequently, Irina must be kept at a distance. The 'isolation' of the glass pane in her CIA holding cell keeps this archaic mother with her unknown desire safely apart from Sydney when she visits, and the camera only ever frames one of them, creating the impression of each looking into a mirror that reflects the other back, an image of pre-Symbolic mother-daughter identification.

The twinning of Sydney and Irina in this fashion plays out a fantasy of the mother's body in the Imaginary that requires the Symbolic 'function of the father' to intervene, for the mother's body presents a taboo against psychic 'Oneness' – that which 'fails to create a proper name, a

Symbolic identity, a social link' (Ragland-Sullivan 1992b, 377). Where the drama of Persephone *enforces* the taboo it is particularly evocative in *Alias*. Jack constantly attempts to institute himself as the third term in the triangular dyad, as Zeus does in the myth, pointing out that finding her mother will not solve Sydney's problems ('Do you expect her just to say "I'm sorry"?') and warning against the limits of fantasy for 'what could she *ever* say that would satisfy you?' ('Masquerade' 1.18).

The series foregrounds Jack's necessary role in breaking this tension *visually* when Sydney visits her mother during a rare outdoor period from her holding cell, and there is no glass separating them. The camera avoids capturing both women in the same frame, but on leaving, Sydney impulsively runs back to embrace her mother, and the camera grants the image it has seemingly fought hard to suppress – union with the mother's body. Armed US marshals rush in to rupture the union in a metaphor of the father/phallus, suggesting the union is incompatible with a subject functioning in the Symbolic 'law of the father.' For though both Sydney and Irina struggle to break Sydney's fantasies of the lost mother, Jack is the only one who refuses to get caught in these fantasies and habitually attempts to keep the two apart. When Irina is believed to have contracted Sydney's life, Jack is forced to take lethal action against Irina, confessing to Sydney 'the only way to save my daughter's life was to kill her mother' ('Search and Rescue' 4.21).

During Irina's disappearances, the question of her desire (like Jack's consent) is dramatized through displacement of Sydney's Oedipal drama onto other characters. Once displaced, Sydney can confront the question more clearly and discern key details in an analysis of these projected/lost primal scenes. Vaughn and Lauren's spy marriage, for instance, clearly replicates the Bristows' where visual and narrative gestures cast Lauren as an uncanny double for 'Laura'/Irina (see, also, 'The Descent' 4.20). Similarly, during season two, the question of Irina's desire for Sydney is projected onto the narrative of Elsa Caplan (Tracy Middendorf), 'a Russian agent who betrayed her [CIA] husband' ('Snowman' 2.19).[18] Elsa is placed in Irina's recently vacated cell at the CIA for interrogation, and Sydney manages to discern the 'true loyalty' of Elsa as loving wife and mother, a story Jack refuses. Though Sydney reminds him 'Elsa Caplan and my mother are not the same person,' Jack confirms the narrative displacement by confronting Elsa with the story he has constructed to explain Irina's decision to have a baby (Sydney) in their spy marriage ('Endgame' 2.19). The narrative returns once more to the symptom – how 'Sydney' came to be – via the proxy of Elsa.

Sydney's discovery of a half-sister, Nadia, with an almost identical back-story to her own – a Persephone figure who awakens to her contract with a criminal underworld – provides another displacement for Sydney to interrogate for missing scenes that 'repeat and replay lost time' in the story of Sydney's 'origins' (Brooks 1994, 6). Referred to in Rambaldi parlance as 'The Restoration' ('Hourglass' 3.19), the retelling of Nadia's Persephone story allows, as Brooks argues, for 'enhanced listening,' for, by virtue of the story's 'otherness,' it creates 'a changed understanding of narrative entailments and consequences' (1994, 71). In Nadia's narrative, both Sydney and the audience are able to discern subtle differences that clarify aspects of Sydney's story and cast doubt over others.

Nadia's Persephone story is particularly useful in identifying Irina's 'desire,' and Katya recalls Hekate as help-mate to Demeter in finding Korê (lines 54–9) when she relays this information ('Legacy' 3.21). In Katya's version, Irina's maternal instinct to find her daughter (Nadia) suggests Sydney might also have been 'longed for.' As with the displacement of Irina's agenda onto Elsa Caplan, however, this retelling of Persephone's origins fails because Irina's ritual absence and return both discloses and represses, always delaying the 'full utterance.' In one instance Irina tells Sydney that, 'my love for you, for your father, was not a contrivance' ('The Telling' 2.22) only to reveal, 'I never wanted to have a child. The KGB demanded it. They knew it would ensure your father's allegiance to me. You were simply a means to an end' ('There Is Only One Sydney Bristow' 5.12). Again, however, Irina confuses the issue by telling Sydney:

> When the doctor put you in my arms and I looked at you ... so fragile ... all I could think was: how could I have made such a terrible mistake? And at that moment I was sure of *one* thing: I couldn't be an agent and a mother. I'd either fail at one or both, and I chose to fail at being a mother. ('Maternal Instinct' 5.11)

The death of Irina in the final episode seems to provide a final statement on the fantasy of the mother for Sydney: she must be relinquished for Symbolic order functioning. Though Irina refuses to mother her daughters, she tells Sydney that, 'whatever you might think, I do love you' ('All the Time in the World' 5.17). The problem thus emerges of a choice: to be 'agent' or 'a mother.' Irina tells Sydney she will 'realize in time' 'you can't be both' and though Sydney replies 'watch me' ('Maternal Instinct' 5.11), the balancing act of motherhood and work is clearly articulated in *Alias*, via the espionage plot, as being more than

just an economic challenge for Western governments (as I expand on in Chapter 6). As Sydney discovers during her pregnancy with Isabelle, the Real of her pregnant body cannot be covered over by masquerade – except as another pregnant body.

The fantasy of recovering the goddess that Irina represents therefore also stages Demeter's role in the myth as a political allegory for feminism. Irina's extensive knowledge of natural science denotes the ancient goddess as a more authentic 'woman' since her knowledge of the natural world is untouched by patriarchy – though as I argue above, it would be more accurate to say she is untouched by Judeo Christian values. Irina finds locally growing vegetation to heal Sydney's wounds in Pakistan ('The Passage, Part 1' 2.8 and 'The Passage, Part 2' 2.9), demonstrates her 'natural' skills of midwifery when diagnosing problems with Sydney's labour (before successfully birthing Sydney's daughter Isabelle in 'Maternal Instinct' 5.11), and guides Sydney through the safe abortion of the Mueller device ('Before the Flood' 4.22). Irina's knowledge of and success at harnessing Rambaldi's works denotes her power as a goddess, controlling life and death on a global scale, and places her as a dual site of creation and destruction in Rambaldi's Christian ideology (especially 'Before the Flood' 4.22 and 'All the Time in the World' 5.17). As such, Irina represents a fantasy of a castrating or phallic 'feminist mother' who has rejected her maternal role to appropriate the discourse of Rambaldi-as-patriarchy for herself. Irina knows Rambaldi's prophecies intimately but will not reveal them; in the post-feminist allegory, Sydney is in complete ignorance of Rambaldi's works and what they mean (in relation to the body). It would seem, therefore, that Irina-as-feminist has mistaken Rambaldi's essentialism for patriarchal power and, as the final episode reveals, will stop at nothing – including Sydney's life – to harness this power for herself.

As a metaphor for the feminist/mother, Irina's identity as 'The Man' (see 'Almost Thirty Years' 1.22) is strongly reminiscent of Demeter's drawing a veil over herself to disguise her mortal identity after separation from the daughter (lines 197–9). Agha-Jaffar argues that in this act Demeter 'deliberately positions herself outside that community and designates herself as "Other"' (2002, 60), for 'the person donning the veil is autonomous, free from man-made restraints, is one unto herself, and impervious to the demands placed on her by society' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 63).[19] Certainly, Irina has made herself impervious to the specific societal demand that she mother her child; however, Irina's disguise as The Man *as a means of* appropriating Rambaldi's discourse is suggestive of feminist attempts to gain 'equality' by adopting the master's discourse

(for example, Gallop 1982). By masquerading as The Man Irina draws a veil over her femininity, seeking 'equality' by repudiating the Real of sexual difference. Sydney's Persephone status, as a symptom of the post-feminist impasse, suggests she must restore the world to rights by 'rising again' in the wake of Irina's destruction – recalling that Persephone's name derives from *pherto* and *aphapto*, as the 'destruction fixer,' bringer or bearer of fruit (Room 1990, 239–40).

## 'To dying, and coming back to life!'[20]

The motif of death and rebirth appears in Sydney's narrative again and again where, I argue, it stages the ritual death of a particular female identity associated with the discourses of feminism, patriarchy, and the epistemological impasse articulated in the series: a death of *ways of seeing and knowing*, of understanding the world and the woman. In this way, the death of 'Sydney' is symptom that 'repeats' as Brooks puts it, as 'a form of remembering, brought into play when recollection properly speaking is blocked by resistance' (1985, 98–9). It is notable, then, that this death and rebirth cycle repeats in other female characters such as Dixon's daughter Robin (Tristin Mays), Nadia, and Sydney's young protégé Rachel. Sydney imparts what she has recovered and confirmed as her own story when she breaks the news to Rachel that she has been abducted into an underworld ('I want to tell you a story. Just stop me if I get something wrong'). Moreover, it is here Sydney identifies her own 'consent': after training to the status of field agent, Sydney guesses Rachel too, began to believe she was 'so important' that she 'had to be out there,' 'sav[ing] the world' ('The Shed' 5.3).

So prominent is this story, in both Sydney's and the stories of other young women in the series (and post-feminist narrative more generally), it suggests the post-feminist impasse in *Alias* is a symptom of a culture into which all young women (in *Alias*, at least) are initiated. Suter argues that initiation renews the community (2005, 74) by educating the initiate into the value system and cultural epistemologies held by that community. Persephone's annual descent and return provides the template upon which the Eleusinian mysteries inducts initiates each year, thus ensuring the continuity of 'the social system that performs the rites' (Suter 2005, 74–8). In *Alias*, Sydney's death is required every time a new criminal network joins the hunt for Rambaldi's work and tries to identify and appropriate Sydney's body – every time Sydney is 'initiated' into the epistemology that projects meaning onto this body. The staging of the Persephone myth in *Alias* thus situates the heroine

*within* existing values – the Rambaldi Christ myth – dramatizing the impasse around the body of the woman in culture. That Sydney *rejects* the world of her initiation and often kills off her Symbolic existence within it is a point I take up in following chapters.

In addition, *Alias* uses the mother/Demeter figure to draw out the debates beneath the post-feminist impasse – the blocked psychic material that must be discharged for the heroine's survival. To do this, Sydney must master her mother's presence/absence, and accept an independent Symbolic identity to mitigate pre-Symbolic fantasies of the 'ideal' or 'persecutory' mother. In doing so, *Alias* not only illustrates the necessity of the 'function of the Father' in saving the child from this Imaginary drama, *Alias restores* this central theme in the Persephone myth to cultural consciousness where feminist thought has repudiated it. Zeus is required to mitigate Demeter's destructive lament, allowing Persephone to separate more easily, and establishing no less than a carefully regulated relationship between mother and a now independent daughter. Here the Persephone myth reflects a basic function of psychoanalysis, which is, according to Sjöholm, 'to turn us away from a fantasmatic position as victim or toy of an invisible Other' (2004, 127). Like the child's *fort/da* game, Sydney must master her experience of maternal loss, so she will no longer be subject to Irina's ambiguous desire, a 'toy' of the M/Other.

The final episode, 'All the Time in the World' (5.17), returns to the question of Sydney's consent as a final utterance of who 'Sydney' is, as dependant on the presumption of her autonomous identity – an agent of free will. The episode opens on Sydney's memory of being asked as a child 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' Her melancholic expression suggests child-Sydney cannot answer this question. Though Jack's role in Sydney's recruitment is ambiguous throughout the series, this episode resolves the ambiguity with *visual* proof in the flashback to Jack's emotionally tortured response upon learning of Sydney's recruitment. Jack knows what it really means (Sydney has unwittingly joined the 'bad guys'), yet Sydney thinks Jack's dismay undermines her attempt to become something of value in the world. Nevertheless, as Jack dies, he tells Sydney she was 'far too driven and far too strong to let someone like me stop you from becoming who you are' ('All the Time in the World' 5.17). The scene turns to a memory of Sydney's promotion to field agent at SD-6 where she tells Sloane, 'for as long as I can remember I have been searching: for what I'm supposed to do, for what I'm supposed to *be*. This is my purpose, it's in my blood, it's who I am.' Thus, though tensions between body and psyche are not fully resolved, Sydney has

come to accept her 'hard wiring' by Jack as equal factors in how she came to 'be.' That is, she has reconciled the Real of her body and its physical aptitude – regardless of origin – in relation to her Symbolically constituted self.

Like Persephone's closing speech in the *Hymn*, this sequence of remembrances discharges the attempt to recover Sydney's existence as Persephone, representing 'missing links' and 'repressed secrets and traumas' that answer the question of 'how she came to be' in this underworld. Though there is still a sense of fatedness ('it's in my blood, it's who I am'), as with Persephone, Sydney eagerly accepts what fate has offered. And where the narrative closes on the memory of Sydney's consent, it recalls discrepancies in Persephone's account of eating pomegranate seeds. When Persephone tells Demeter what took place in the underworld, she rearranges the timeline of events to emphasize that she would not willingly separate from Demeter (so as not to hurt her), yet still achieves independence (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 49). As Suter puts it, 'Persephone has her cake and eats it too: she announces herself as a grown woman and a loving daughter' (2005, 41). The creators of *Alias*, likewise, wait for this final moment – after all consequences are worked through – to reveal Sydney's consent. The retelling of the primal scene (of her abduction) here suggests Sydney can now understand the past. She has not suddenly remembered these moments but, as with the symptom brought to the analyst in the psychoanalytic clinic, the memory can now be contextualized in her narrative: it is a 'full utterance' that 'discharges' textual desire.

The question of consent is prominent for many post-feminist heroines, and is not always resolved as categorically as it is in *Alias*. Because Sydney's story returns to pre-Symbolic issues of identity, a key feature of the myth – sexual initiation – is absent from her story, but it is the primary focus of the Persephone myth in *Veronica Mars*, to which I now turn. The epistemological impasse over the woman's body in *Alias* underscores the dramatization of feminine sexuality in *Veronica Mars*. In the following chapter, I consider how, in response to the heroine's Persephone story the series articulates feminist critiques of post-feminist sensibilities, and demonstrate how this critique is at an impasse over the issue of feminine *jouissance* – of feminine pleasure and desire.

# 5

# Persephone as Methodological Impasse: Feminine *Jouissance* in Veronica's 'Two Stories'

As we have seen in previous chapters, feminist discourses are at an impasse over post-feminist sensibilities, specifically over the Real of sexual difference. What the Persephone plot in *Veronica Mars* amplifies is precisely where this touches on feminine sexuality. Specifically, *Veronica Mars* shows us where the methodological impasses of feminist cultural criticisms speak of a moral foreclosure towards pleasure, for where the series explores the mystery of its heroine's sexual initiation, it animates the foreclosure of the Real of the drives in critiques of post-feminist expressions of feminine sexuality. The heroine, 17-year-old Veronica Mars (Kristen Bell), is a witty, intelligent teen-sleuth who works in the family P.I. business 'Mars Investigations' after school. The scene of her sexual initiation is, as with Persephone's in the *Hymn*, hidden from view as, drugged, Veronica cannot remember her first sexual experience, though believes it to have been rape. In an echo of Suter's work on the *Hymn* (2005, 39), however, Veronica's sleuthing reveals there are literally 'two stories' to her initiation: rape by a fellow student and, it is later revealed, consensual sex with an ex-boyfriend. How these two stories are interpreted is, as with the *Hymn*, shaped by the epistemologies of the era in which they are told.

Initially, Veronica's investigation into her initiation replicates feminist interest in the *Hymn*; it is congruent with feminist responses to post-feminist sensibilities and produces the story of 'rape by patriarchy.' Yet where her detecting reveals a second story it exposes what is unconscious in critiques of post-feminist sensibilities: Persephone's story of feminine *jouissance*. That is, a *jouissance* in the literal sense, of a particular erotic enjoyment tied to the feminine position – a *jouissance* in the Real of

feminine sexuation. Veronica's Persephone story therefore articulates the *complex* of un/conscious ideas cathected to feminine sexuality in the post-feminist impasse.

I begin by showing how Veronica's Persephone story is shaped through the stylistic influences of gothic noir traditions – reinvented through an adolescent lens – to reproduce the metaphor of Persephone's 'two stories' in each season via the conflation of the heroine's story with that of another blonde teenage girl. This conflation stages a real and metaphoric 'death of the maiden' image of Persephone as depicted in Christian eras, where the sexual realm is associated with sin and death. This staging denotes, I suggest, the unconscious place and consequent distortion of feminine *jouissance* in feminist cultural criticisms that continues the Judeo Christian negation of the Real of the drives such that an impasse of knowledge about pleasure forms in feminist discourses. In season three, the radical discourses of the 'straw feminist' paranoiacally project these negated drives onto the 'patriarchal' Other in the archetypal figure of patriarchy – the 'frat-boy' – in the fantasy of 'rape by patriarchy.' Ultimately, this chapter shows how the emphasis on patriarchy in feminist discourses is a *symptom* of the impasse that has come to form a *methodological* deadlock in feminist critiques of feminine sexuality in post-feminist sensibilities.

## Post-feminist noir in Neptune's Greek pantheon

The highly stylized scene of Veronica's Persephone story within the fictional town of 'Neptune,' California, presents a world rich in symbolism associated with the Greek pantheon of gods and mortals depicted in Homeric poetry. Veronica is thought to be the daughter of one of two figures of power and influence in Neptune: Keith Mars (Enrico Colantoni), ex-town Sheriff and now subversive figure of power, or billionaire computer developer Jake Kane (Kyle Secor), whose wealth and influence afford him the status of 'Zeus' amongst the gods and who, it transpires, played a role in separating Veronica from her mother. Located on an isolated stretch of coastline, Neptune is 'a town without a middle class' ('Pilot – Extended Version with an Unaired Opening Sequence' 1.1; henceforth 'Pilot') and without federal or greater State law enforcement; rather, the Sheriff's department and Mayor work with the wealthy residents to distribute justice. Though no topology is memorably depicted, one senses the palatial mansions of Neptune's wealthy elite sprawl opulently as if on mount Olympus, while a bar on the wrong side of town – 'The River Styx' – known for its underworld

activity, symbolically invokes the gateway to Hades. Here, the ruling class of god-like celebrities and captains of industry (literally) get away with murder, while the working-class mortals feel their wrath.[1]

The division of wealth in Neptune recalls the division of sovereignty in the Greek pantheon, where Zeus governs the heavens, Hades the underworld, and Poseidon the oceans. In Neptune, the Kanes' rule over Industry, the Echolls' Celebrity, and the Casablancas' Finance, and the three male characters in Veronica's Persephone story – Duncan Kane (Teddy Dun), Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring), and Richard 'Dick' Casablancas (Ryan Hansen) – are thus 'first sons' of Neptune and enjoy many hedonistic liberties without consequence or, at least, without serious legal ramifications. The ambiguity regarding which is the Hades figure in Veronica's Persephone story is never firmly established. And though the Roman nomenclature of Veronica's paternal name 'Mars' – Roman deity for the Greek Ares (god of War) – aptly denotes Keith Mars' role as town agitator, it nevertheless hints at the ambiguity over Veronica's paternity and, even more so, the question of who is her Hades. In versions other than the *Hymn*, for instance, Demeter is raped by Poseidon (Suter 2005, 109), and Veronica's initiation is caught in a similar ambiguity: she shares sexual experiences with Duncan and later Logan, but is also raped by Dick's younger brother, Cassidy 'Beaver' Casablancas (Kyle Gallner).

*Veronica Mars* stages many of the tropes of the Persephone myth in a world where post-feminist sensibilities dominate the social terrain in that, in McRobbie's terms, it has incorporated feminism 'in principle, if not in fact' (2004, 513) such that where feminism offers critique of this world it appears as a radical 'Other' antithetical to the community. In fact, I want to suggest here that popular feminist thought has pervaded common-sense notions of equality to such an extent it has become, in many regards, what Brooks calls a secular 'sacred myth' (1994, 5), for where feminism has been incorporated into the community it provides a new meta-narrative that, as I argue shortly, inherits Judeo Christian values of morality that foreclose the Real for an inflated idealism of the 'Good.' In this, the series draws on the melodramatic mode of conflict where 'good and evil' forces operate in a 'mythological' world to animate what Brooks calls the 'moral occult': 'the domain of operative spiritual values' – here feminism – 'indicated within and masked by the surface of reality' depicted – in *Veronica Mars* post-feminism (1994, 4–5). The heavy stylization of teen, noir, and hard-boiled detective genres creates an aesthetic landscape dominated by surreal lighting where sharp shadows in the unusually dark interiors of Neptune High School, the

Mars family apartment, and Investigation offices generate a 'sinister or perversely violent mood' characteristic of gothic conventions (Naremore 1998, 182). *Veronica Mars* nevertheless reinvents noir through the teen genre where, as the series is shot in full colour, the sinister violence is backlit with saturated primary colours that heighten the violent surrealism through a sense of charged teenage emotion. Neptune is thus a place of extremes where, as Veronica tells us, 'your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires' ('Pilot' 1.1). And we might similarly say that, in Neptune, one is either feminist or post-feminist (and hence patriarchal), but there is very little room (according to feminism's 'operative values') for anything in between. Significantly, for Cawelti, the hard-boiled detective's description of the narrative landscape offers a visual metaphor for the state of life within which a crime has taken place – usually, a 'gleaming and deceptive façade [that] hides a world of exploitation and criminality in which enchantment and significance must usually be sought elsewhere' – what Cawelti terms 'empty modernity' (1977, 141). In this, Neptune presents post-feminism as a 'surface reality' described by the 'operative spiritual values' of feminist discourse – now a dominant paradigm, in theory, if not in fact. That is, Neptune's post-feminism is staged in feminist terms, as an empty façade built on corrupt foundations of 'false consciousness' – of class, if not sexual sensibilities.

The mother's absence in this adolescent world stages a key theme in Persephone's story as it animates the female triangular situation in the transition toward adulthood: the re-negotiation of early triangular dynamics as the girl enters the sexual realm. Lianne Mars (Corinne Bohrer) has abandoned the family so that, as with Persephone in the *Hymn*, the heroine's cries of rape go unheard. Like Demeter, Lianne 'draws a veil' (line 197) over her identity, leaving town to 'wander' to another location and, as with Demeter, Lianne negotiates with Zeus figure Jake Kane over her daughter's destiny (see 'Drinking the Kool Aid' 1.9). Unlike Demeter, however, Lianne is weak and ineffectual; instead of negotiating her daughter's return, Lianne is blackmailed by the Kane family and banished from Neptune to ensure Veronica's future. This extreme measure is consistent with the heightened emotional drama of adolescence and stages the difficulties of re-defining triangular relationships at this time. For as Kulish and Holtzman observe, the dynamics of the Persephone myth animate common feelings of guilt in the girl's divided loyalties to the mother during first sexual experiences, as she is the daughter's *first* object (2008, 148). Equally, as with Persephone, 'the fully sexual young woman is entering what she has perceived as her

mother's realm' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 148), such that conflicts can form in the daughter's relation to her: between feelings of rivalry (for erotic attention), guilt in superseding her (in looks and attention), and anxiety over the perceived separation the milestone represents. Significant anxiety surrounds Veronica's attempts to recover the mother, hinting at these ambivalent feelings. But that Veronica abandons her desire to reunite with her mother (after she stole Veronica's college fund, 'Leave it to Beaver' 1.22), suggests that where Veronica has succeeded her mother in her father's (platonic) affections, she does not wish for her return.

Simultaneously, Veronica's sexual development is confronted with Neptune's stark extremes, where post-feminist sensibilities exist alongside feminist critiques of them – what Mayer anoints the 'contested space of female teen sexuality' (2011, 141). The heroine's initiation and her best friend's death (the result of a sexual liaison turned sour) are compounded by an excess of sex-crimes committed against other young girls that repeat Persephone themes and animate the fears and fantasies surrounding young women's sexuality in post-feminist cultures. As I will discuss further in following sections, sex acts are filmed with and without the girl's permission and distributed on the Internet, invoking fears over the issue of consent (see 'M.A.D.' 1.20, 'Weevils Wobble but They Don't Go Down' 3.19, and 'The Bitch Is Back' 3.20). Even so, Veronica and her peers seem to take these events in their stride in part, I suggest, because they possess the 'hyper-articulation' of the teen genre that is 'witty, knowing' and portrays the 'cynicism' of adults (Davis and Dickinson 2004, 1–3). Yet so great are the number of sex-related crimes in the narrative, I argue they serve a specific narrative function. Neptune's façade of post-feminist enchantment falls away as a string of other young Korês are raped, abducted, or come to harm as if such occurrences were simply the way things are.[2] Nonetheless, where many might interpret this as 'resurgent patriarchy' within post-feminist enchantment, I argue it reveals the impasse in ideas about sexuality where the Real of the drives and of sexuation have been foreclosed – indeed, that it exposes feminist interpretations of post-feminist sensibilities as the *effect* of this foreclosure.

## Persephone's 'two stories'

The conflation of Veronica's sexual initiation with the murder of her best friend, Lilly Kane (Amanda Seyfried), creates a metaphor for the way feminine sexuality is (not) recognized in feminist discourses. Like Korê's

initiation in the *Hymn*, both events are shrouded in mystery: Veronica was drugged and cannot remember it, and though Koontz (Christian Clemenson) has confessed to Lilly's murder, Veronica discovers evidence undermining his confession ('Pilot' 1.1). Creator Rob Thomas makes no apologies for being influenced by David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1991–2), and Mayer points out (2011, 142–3) that the 'dead blonde' motif in both programmes is equally evocative of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), as 'Lilly Kane' riffs off 'Lila Crane' the 'dead blonde' in *Psycho* (see Thomas and Wilson 2006). Yet unlike *Twin Peaks*, the detective is a teenage girl and the victim's best friend: 'cute as a button' high-school student Veronica Mars.

The two unsolved crimes inspire an investigation that takes the shape of an intricately entwined single crime. In this, the series *re*-emphasizes what Suter argues (2005, 39) is evidence of 'two versions' of Persephone's story in the *Hymn*, 'usually conflated and treated as one': Persephone's and the poet's. As with other post-feminist Persephones Veronica discovers a formerly unknown sister in her now dead best friend Lilly, who is potentially her half-sister. Mayer (2011, 140–1) notes that Lilly and Veronica are mirrored in flashbacks to the previous year where, I would further argue, Lilly functions as a narrative reflection directing light onto the unconscious element of Veronica's two stories, similar to Sydney's sister in *Alias*. Harris argues 'the motif of the double' often denotes 'the girl's split or divided consciousness' (2008, 158), and I suggest Lilly therefore emphasizes what is yet unconscious in Veronica's story. As does the entwining of Veronica's narrative, as Mayer further notes, with the figure of another 'dead blonde' in the second and third seasons (2011, 143) – Meg Manning (Alona Tal), and Parker Lee (Julie Gonzalo) respectively – where Meg is murdered in Veronica's place, while Parker is raped in the same fashion as Veronica (drugged at a frat party).

As a consequence of this entwining, I argue, two female bodies emerge in the narrative, where the un-symbolized body of the dead girl and her feminine *jouissance* haunts the narrative of the cultural, *symbolized* body of Veronica. That is, where Veronica's Persephone story denotes the feminist impasse over feminine sexuality, Lilly's shadow story (and later Meg's and Parker's) expresses what is *unconscious* in it – as Lilly puts it: 'I've got a secret: a *good* one' ('Pilot' 1.1).

Veronica's discovery that she had consensual sex on the night of her rape is akin to unearthing what Suter argues is Persephone's original or 'core' story – the *hieros gamos* – as an independent goddess prior to the *Hymn* (2005, 49–117). Here Veronica's detective work dovetails towards

the classic subject of both teen and detective genres: the enigma of the *femme fatale* (Doane 1987, 1991a; Žižek 2008a) – of feminine sexuality. In this, I am not suggesting unearthing Persephone's original story will, like the fantasy of reclaiming the goddess, offer a truth of feminine sexuality. Suter's thesis (2005) is based on detailed analysis of diction, language, and poetic tradition to distinguish the two stories in the *Hymn*, and her subsequent argument is not that Persephone teaches us something new about femininity or female sexuality – a 'feminist lesson' to be unearthed. Rather, she argues the 'two stories' are evidence of the attempt on behalf of the poet to bring together two goddess figures (with similar stories and dominion over religious territory: fertility) in the service of a new religious and politico-cultural order. In *Veronica Mars*, two stories serve a contemporary politico-cultural tension, absorbing one (what is *unconscious* in feminist critiques of the post-feminist sensibility) into the other (the operative values of feminism) in a compromise formation.

When Veronica recalls the night of her rape/initiation she observes that, when 'roofied and raped' 'you may not remember the who, when, where, or why, but you know "the what"' ('My Big Fat Greek Rush Week' 3.2).[3] Nevertheless, it is 'the what' that Veronica is preoccupied with and, as in *Alias*, her story opens on the fallout from this event, as a symptom to be deciphered. Socially alienated and sexually vilified, however, Veronica assumes she has been raped after being drugged at an '09er' party (for those who live in the prestigious '09' zip code), without considering that she may have engaged in consensual (albeit underage) sex, the previous night.

Dressed in a virginal white dress with blonde hair flowing, the flashback to Veronica's arrival at Shelley Pomroy's party the previous year recollects Korê, the 'slim-ankled' girl of the *Hymn* (line 2). Veronica's attendance at a party populated by the children of Neptune's wealthy elite resonates poetically with Korê playing 'with the deep-breasted daughters of Ocean' (5). A scene of adolescent frivolity, Shelley's party is, like the narcissus flower, 'wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see' (10) and functions as 'a snare for the flower-faced maiden' (8). As she reaches out to take the drink handed to her from the crush of teenagers, Veronica recalls Korê's outstretched hand plucking 'the lovely toy' (16). And, after the roofie (established as GHB) takes effect, Veronica falls onto a pool lounger (reminiscent of Lilly's pool-side death) where her initiation is, as in the *Hymn*, veiled.[4] The ground metaphorically opens up, and what happens after is open to speculation; all we know is that Veronica is 'no longer that girl' ('Pilot' 1.1).

That Veronica cannot narrate the most important scene in her story is significant. As Suter notes of the *Hymn* (2005, 25–32) who speaks, using what language, and for what purpose, determines how we come to understand Persephone's two 'stories.' The narrative framing of Veronica's voice-over is a clear 'reclaiming and rewriting the detective's authoritative voice' from a youthful female position (Braithwaite 2008, 140). Indeed, where the voice-over is associated with the women's film and romance genres (and feminism), it invites greater identification with the 'heroine's point of view,' sustaining the *authenticity* of her construction of events over an omniscient third person (Mabry 2006, 195). In the *Hymn*, for instance, the poet states Korê 'screamed with a shrill voice, calling on her father, the son of Kronos highest and best' (lines 20–1) and, in *Veronica Mars*, the pilot returns to the flashback to depict Veronica stumbling barefoot into the Sheriff's department (the symbolic father) to 'report a crime.' And like the *Hymn*, 'not one of the immortals, or of humankind, heard her voice' (22–3). The current Sheriff, Lamb (Michael Muhney), dismisses Veronica's claim as a 'wolf cry,' and when Veronica attempts recovery of this scene, the lack of cooperation recalls Demeter's frustrations as 'No one was willing to tell her the truth, not one of the Gods or mortals' (44–5).

Veronica must rely on others to narrate the scene, but, as with Persephone in the *Hymn*, 'the poet has taken over her voice and embedded it in his story, framed by his agenda' (Suter 2005, 21). The core story is present in Persephone's story but, for the majority of the poem, Suter argues (2005, 9–10), it has been reworked into the 'Olympian frame' of diction and ancient Greek poetry to infer agency and status on different speakers. Veronica, like *scholars* of the Persephone myth, stands outside her own story and tries to make sense of the details given to her. As each tells their version of the story, the accompanying flashback has enough common elements to imply *some* common truth – a 'core story' – while emphasis on agency and desire is redistributed to apportion blame and responsibility to different actors. First, Meg recalls seeing Veronica on the pool lounger as the object of a group 'salt lick'/'body-shot' game, but insists someone arrived to rescue her. Luke (Sam Huntington) reveals he gave GHB to Dick Casablancas, who gave it to girlfriend Madison (Amanda Noret), who was mad at Veronica for attending the party. Luke further suggests Madison didn't take the GHB, because 'it's my understanding that it's supposed to make you happier, not angrier,' and Madison admits her anger responded to witnessing Veronica drunkenly kissing Dick, a detail backed up by Casey's version (Jonathan Bennett). As Suter observes of the *Hymn*, the poet's discursive

frameworks function to 'instruct' the 'audience on how to receive his new version of the mythic materials' derived from earlier periods and myths (2005, 119), and instruction is clear in the retelling of the event by the eyewitnesses. Madison sees Veronica as a seductress, while Casey recalls the same moment with Veronica almost unconscious, pleading to go home.

Suter observes many similarities between the 'coming of age' initiation ritual for young women and Persephone's story (2005, 74), and Veronica's two stories certainly initiate her into the way young women's sexuality is misrecognized in post-feminist culture, for it is an initiation into an impasse. Initiation rites in ancient Greece served to induct initiates into the 'symbols and traditions' of the community, ensuring the continuity of 'the social system that performs the rites' by educating the initiate in the values and epistemologies held by that community (Suter 2005, 74–8). Veronica's initial recovery of events *seemingly* reveals post-feminist culture as 'the patriarchal shadow of Hades' (Carlson 1997, 16), but this is, I argue, a patriarchy constructed via the tropes of feminist discourses in readings of Persephone's story, as one of 'rape by patriarchy' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 145). For where, as McRobbie argues (noted in previous chapters), post-feminist cultures have absorbed the goals and values of feminism into their institutional frameworks and are inherently feminist – 'in principle, if not in fact' (2004, 513) – that world articulates the agenda 'that feminism has made public' about women's lives (Brunsdon 1997, 34). Yet the 'coming of age' pattern, fertility rites, Eleusinian mysteries, and agrarian rites are somewhat conflated in the *Hymn*, and Suter argues that because Persephone's 'other story' – the *hieros gamos* – is the only trope *consistent* with anthropological evidence, it denotes Persephone's 'core story' (2005, 72). Similarly, Veronica's original story of consensual sex is present (consistent with supporting evidence), but it has been taken over by the feminist story of 'rape by patriarchy.'

Witnesses 'instruct' Veronica (and viewers) on how to interpret the scene as rape despite discrepancies in evidence undermining this reading. When Veronica learns Dick and Troy prepared her for Beaver to have his first sexual experience, as before, there are enough common details to establish Dick and Troy's role in the event. In Troy and Beaver's versions, Beaver hesitates: 'She's not willing Dick, she's unconscious' and Dick offers to get Beaver 'started' (pushing up Veronica's skirt), while Troy offers to 'draw a diagram.' In both versions, Beaver asks them to leave, and in both versions, either Dick or Troy tosses Beaver a condom: 'Make sure you suit up, you don't know where she's been' ('A Trip to

the Dentist' 1.21). In contrast to these consistent accounts, Dick tells Veronica she was already in bed inviting Beaver to lie with her when he came in, but Veronica dismisses this as impossible. When questioned, Beaver tells Veronica once all had left he chastely pushed her skirt down before running outside to vomit 'the last time I saw you, you were passed out' ('A Trip to the Dentist' 1.21).

Given that Veronica's story (and the entire series) is fictional, it is significant that almost every girl who has sex in the series is presented through the 'rape by patriarchy' paradigm. Each girl's sexual experience is followed by an undesirable outcome such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, loss of reputation, dubious consent, trauma, or death. The series thus stages a fantasy of patriarchy in which no girl, even if she consents, can really take pleasure in sex because there are always negative consequences. Indeed, Joyrich states that 'if there is a dominant "story" – or actually, set of stories – in *Veronica Mars*, it is the ugly story of rape' (2007; see also, Whitney 2011, 152). I suggest, rather, that this points us to a significant issue in feminist discourses regarding pleasure and desire, specifically, feminine *jouissance*.

## Pomegranates, knowledge, and the Real

To be sure, the myth of Persephone, as with Veronica's two stories, is violent and traumatic; according to the poet, Korê 'screamed with a shrill voice' (20) 'throbbing through the barren air' as if, according to Demeter, (67–8), 'she were suffering violence.' The *Hymn*'s language is provocative and strongly emotional because, as argued in Chapter 1, it touches on the Real that, Lacan notes, often inspires anxiety (SX, 158). Calasso's synthesizing of mythic and scholarly materials poeticizes the immediacy and eroticism of *transgressing* the Real that the *Hymn* stages: the scene of Korê's abduction is described, for example, as a place where 'dogs would lose their quarry's trail, so violent was the scent of the flowers' (1994, 209). Yet he questions Korê scream, for though '[s]omebody heard a cry…what did that cry mean?' (Calasso 1994, 209). The *hieros gamos* here, as with the Eleusinian mysteries, is not simply a fertile union with the earth, but the crossing of a sacred threshold, a transgression that *goes beyond* our normal limits. Indeed, this transgression is both a condition of *jouissance* – as Lacan puts it 'without transgression there is no access to *jouissance*' (SVII, 177) – and points to the Real of the drives that *jouissance* touches. The Real of the drives expressed in Hade's rape/abduction of Persephone is occluded in the *Hymn,* but the transgression in the Real has nevertheless been

metaphorised: as Hades is a 'place where there is no body' Calasso puts it that the myth animates a moment where, 'along with Kore's body, Eros penetrated the kingdom of the dead' (1994, 211). Lacan's 'impossible Real' is connoted in Calasso's description of the pomegranate symbol (of sexual knowledge) when he notes that Persephone 'remembers the pomegranate seeds' 'like a distant memory' as a 'taste of the invisible that would never leave her' (1994, 220). For Korê's crossing over is, as many note, 'irreversible' (Calasso 1994, 211), and where it touches the Real, the myth also animates the anxieties it can induce. From their clinical experience Kulish and Holtzman note that separation anxiety from the mother can lead young girls to disavow their sexual impulses which, significantly, manifest 'in fearful rape fantasies' (2008, 149). The staging of Veronica's first sexual experience denotes a similar defence has come into play: a young girl's initiation has taken place, yet in a 'distorted and unrecognized form' (Freud SE22, 15).[5]

At one level this defence is a product of conservative prime-time values where, as we saw in Chapter 3, creators of programming are subject to censorship of the network which is indicative of mainstream attitudes toward feminine sexuality that are at an impasse. All characters are under the age of consent (in Californian State law) at the time of these events (Kaveney 2006, 179). It is unusual if not, as Mayer notes (2011, 147), part of *Veronica Mars*'s 'edgy' appeal, that sexual crimes and consensual (if underage) sexual activity occupies the story arc of each season. On the other hand, it is customary for adolescent literature to focus on narratives of abjection and stage anxieties about the process of identity formation in relation to the social and the corporeal (Coats 2004, 140). The Imaginary body constructed during childhood – via the demarcation of waste from physical boundaries of the 'I' – must, in adolescence, be re-inscribed as a sexual body, in 'a movement from disgust to eroticism' (Coats 2004, 143). As it takes place within the terms of the Symbolic (that make this body intelligible), this process is problematic, because although 'contemporary culture no longer supports repression of teenage sexuality [it] has yet to come to terms with its own conflictual attitudes regarding exploration and polymorphous expressions of that sexuality' (Coats 2004, 143).

Where feminist critiques of the Persephone myth have an inadequate understanding of the original culture in which the myth takes place, *Veronica Mars* shows us where epistemologies informing feminist discourses on feminine sexuality are similarly limited. Suter's work on Persephone is an exception in that she is careful to distinguish Korê's abduction from rape.[6] In fact, Suter does not use the word rape in her

analysis as she argues that the myth is derived from Persephone's original story, that of the *hieros gamos* or sacred sexual union between the fertility goddess and her consort (the earth). Traces of the *hieros gamos* are still evident in the *Hymn*'s Olympian frame, as the poet's language describes Korê as being given to Hades with Zeus' permission 'to be called his fertile wife' (79–80).[7] In fact, Hades is an underexplored figure within the dominant frame of feminist analysis, dismissed as a collaborator of Zeus where, at Demeter's questioning, Helios (Sun god associated with sight) admits he watched as Hades 'snatched [Korê] screaming into the misty gloom' (81). As I explore in the following chapter, however, Hades' function and symbolism is significant – Helios points out Hades makes a good match for Persephone, for he is 'Commander-to-Many and Zeus's own brother' (85), who 'got his third at the world's first division' (86).

Nevertheless, where Neptune articulates what 'feminism has made public' about women's lives Veronica's investigation follows feminist readings of the myth that frame Korê's story as rape. Her seething outrage is undoubtedly justified; as Braithwaite puts it, she is the object of an organized rape at a 'fraternal house party at which teenage boys drugged their dates in order to have sex' (2008, 144). I do not wish to undermine the criminal act depicted in Veronica's rape (or other crimes against women in the series). The response to these crimes in the narrative, however, with no sure evidence, parallels feminist responses to the Persephone myth such that I draw attention to the *narrative* treatment of sex-crime in the series. As a narrative *excess*, I suggest, the many sex-crimes are characteristic of the melodramatic mode that aims to 'express all': as Brooks puts it, in melodrama '[n]othing is spared [and] nothing is left unsaid; the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable' (1994, 4). Here, the repetition of rape in *Veronica Mars* provides a *symptom* of the impasse that is the melodramatic 'effort to signify' (Brooks 1994, xiii) what has been foreclosed (and remains unconscious) in post-feminist culture.

**Persephone's 'other' story**

Where Veronica investigates, she unearths another version to her story, just as Persephone, when given her chance to speak in the *Hymn* (lines 406–33), describes events to her mother that, critically, the poet has already narrated. When Persephone repeats the core story, her version imparts important information regarding her experience, which 'differs often in emphasis and almost always in point of view' (Suter 2005, 40). And when Veronica interrogates Carrie (Leighton Meester), Carrie admits she saw through an open door Veronica and Duncan having sex. As in

all versions, the audience never hears Carrie describe the scene, only sees the visual flashback, and it does not imply Veronica was raped. But when Veronica confronts Duncan she nevertheless charges him with being 'the one that raped me!' Duncan's insistence it was 'consensual' is confirmed in Duncan's flashback, where Veronica initiates intimacy between them. Like Veronica, Duncan has little memory of the night (he was also slipped GHB) and when Veronica accuses him of rape he is flabbergasted, 'I thought we had some unspoken rule, like, we're never going to talk about it, but now I raped you?' ('A Trip to the Dentist' 1.21). Duncan's reason for never mentioning it touches on an aspect of the Real evident in the myth – incest – as he is forced to admit 'you're my sister! And I knew it!' ('A Trip to the Dentist' 1.21).

Though two versions of the story are in play – one echoing a feminist critique of the myth, the other Persephone's *hieros gamos* – it is nevertheless evident that both stories are produced under forms of defensive resistance: 'the what' of Veronica's story remains unconscious. Agha-Jaffar argues that the collusion of silence around Korê/Persephone's abduction during *Demeter's* investigations demonstrates that '[i]n a sense, the entire patriarchy colludes to rape her [Korê], and she is powerless against the onslaught' (2002, 145). Yet Veronica's investigation reveals this is not the only story, and there is a sense of relief in the belief (at this point) she was not raped. Just as Persephone somewhat coyly tells her mother that she resisted Hades (lines 411–13), whose advances were 'much against [her] will' (line 432), Veronica tells Logan later in the episode with a coy smile 'I was drugged but I wasn't…I was with Duncan' ('A Trip to the Dentist' 1.21).

The possibility that Duncan and Veronica are half-siblings is suggestive of a further defence against the Real of the drives, for even when she consents Veronica is found to have transgressed Symbolic laws. Moreover, at the end of Season 2, Lilly's murder trial reprises the first story of rape. Veronica discovers that she has chlamydia ('Look Who's Stalking' 2.20), leading to the discovery Beaver *did* rape her after all – giving her chlamydia ('Not Pictured' 2.22). Together, Veronica's two stories present a 'core story': the sexual initiation of a young girl. But the series is ambivalent about which story is to be privileged as Veronica's 'real' story, evident in the conflation of Veronica's story with Lilly's murder. For it is this assumption of rape as the 'core story' that Lilly's narrative sheds light on where, like Wright's description of the symptom, 'what is left out of the story returns to haunt' (1998, 129).

The latent knowledge in Veronica's story is evident in Lilly's haunting of the narrative and, in the collapsing of Veronica and Lilly's

stories, where an ambiguous twinning suggests two parts of a whole. The uncanny flashback to Lilly's limo-party ('The Wrath of Con' 1.4), when Lilly kisses Veronica in a dare, broadly hints that Lilly and Veronica are sisters via Duncan's repulsed 'that's my girlfriend and my sister!' but the most significant collapse between the two stories takes place in an flashback to Veronica's rape/initiation, a sequence that, in the noir tradition, appears 'situated on the margins of [a] dream' (Naremore 1998, 12), where it takes on the qualities of Lilly's murder scene – depicted moments before. The dream-like qualities of each scene allude to a conflation of them in Veronica's memory, as in both scenes the grainy, off-focus footage follows Veronica's movements from inside the house before exiting toward the pool area at the back. In the first, Veronica finds Lilly's body as she attends the crime scene with her father. In the second, she falls onto a pool lounger to pass out, and though she is not raped here, Veronica falls unconscious here and forecloses the memory in much the same way Lilly's murder remains blocked from view.

When Veronica wakes the next morning, the consequences of both crimes collapse into a single narrative image: the death of a young girl. In fact, although the two events take place in different locations (the Kane manor and Shelley's house respectively), the set-dressing for Shelley's party disguises the fact that Veronica's stumble toward the pool is shot at the same location that stands in for the palatial Kane manor throughout the series. Significantly, Veronica encounters Duncan in the house in both scenes, before exiting to the pool area where she and Lilly lose consciousness; he thus functions as the point of repression for each girl's story – that is, as a repression of knowledge. Duncan is the first to find Lilly's body and, likewise, when Veronica interrogates Meg, she learns Duncan found Veronica's body on the pool lounger where he attempted to rescue her. Duncan cannot remember either finding Lilly's body (he suffered a black-out), nor rescuing Veronica at Shelley's party, but Duncan finds Veronica later that night when (he believes) he has sex with his half-sister. The tension between two stories reflects the uncertainty of Veronica's paternity that makes Duncan brother or lover – transgressive or legitimate desire – and the *Hymn* hinges on a similar dependency. As Suter argues (2005, 23–4), Zeus brings the two goddesses and their stories into the new Hellenic order where Persephone's fertility magic is transposed into a story of abduction (mimicking earlier stories of Demeter). For both Persephone and Veronica, Zeus' function determines their stories, but how *we* interpret Zeus' function depends on the epistemologies of our era.

The corporality of Lilly's erotic body exists as unsublimated libidinal energy in the narrative, clearly marked off from Veronica's Symbolic existence, creating unconscious tension between Veronica's two stories. Veronica frequently dreams and hallucinates Lilly's figure, who derisively tells her 'haven't you seen any horror movies? My ghost will haunt you until justice has been served' (see 'Return of the Kane' 1.6). Where Veronica's flashbacks are marked by brightly filtered light, off-focus image, and faintly echoed sound, it draws on noir techniques 'to intensify the surrealist atmosphere of violent confusion, ambiguity, or disequilibrium' (Naremore 1998, 21). Lilly's presence is never identified as real or imaginary for Veronica (though it is for Duncan, the side-effect of anti-depressants) but their two bodies articulate a schism between 'being' (Lilly) in the Real of sexual difference, and 'meaning' (Veronica) in the 'politically correct language' of the 'symbolic order' (Ragland 2004, 148).

The 'double architecture' of detective fiction (Todorov 1977) is useful here, for the crimes committed against each girl (*fable*, story, 'what really happened') are linked through the trail of evidence in Veronica's investigations (*subject*, plot, 'how we come to know what happened'), to mirror the fate of each girl: a real or symbolic death, as Veronica's pursuit of evidence ends with Lilly's killer attempting to murder Veronica in the *mise en scène* of Lilly's murder. Confusion over the body of the young girl and her sexual knowledge reprised in the trial of Lilly's murderer (see 'Happy Go Lucky' 2.21) denotes the 'politically correct' discourse of Veronica's Symbolic world that shapes her story. Veronica's testimony is discredited because she is forced to admit 'carnal knowledge' – that she has had sex (confronted with evidence she has chlamydia) and therefore 'knows' what 'real' sex looks like – yet she is ignorant of how she contracted chlamydia.

Consequently, Veronica's unofficial status as a 'girl' detective troubles legitimate forms of knowledge around the sexuality of young girls – particularly, their own knowledge of it. Mizejewski argues that the female detective dramatizes the different ways of accounting for the female body within competing signifying economies – medical, professional, forensic, and social (2004, 45–51). Tomc notes, however, that in the conflation of detective and *victim*, the distribution of power and knowledge is disturbed, for the detective is 'the traditional repository of knowledge' whereas the 'female murder victim, [is] the one whose knowledge has been annihilated' (1995, 47). But where Neptune presents a feminist fantasy of patriarchy, we can see that feminism here operates as a 'repository of knowledge' that does not recognize Lilly's (or Veronica's)

knowledge of feminine *jouissance* because they are the 'victims' in the story – they are Persephones to be rescued by the 'liberatory' impulse of the feminist scholar. In this, *Veronica Mars* shows us where foreclosures in feminist epistemologies lead to *methodological* impasses.

**'Death and the maiden'**

As with *Alias*, the Persephone myth in *Veronica Mars* shows us where Judeo Christian values and the paternal metaphor of patriarchy become conflated in feminist cultural criticism, and where this conflation is directed toward feminine sexuality – or feminine *jouissance* in feminine sexuation – it denotes the moral foreclosure toward pleasure in much feminist work, or at least, exposes the limits of what that pleasure is allowed to be within feminist episteme. The pomegranate motif of the Persephone myth symbolizes fertility and sexuality (Suter 2005), for instance, but many feminists interpret it as the 'deathly fruit' of patriarchy (Guber 1979) as if it were the apple of Eve's 'carnal knowledge' in Christian mythology that produces female sexuality in a virgin/whore binary. Notably, during the Dark Ages, Persephone's *hieros gamos* – sacred sexual union with the earth/underworld – is redrawn as a real death in the 'death and the maiden' theme where the woman is coupled with sex-*as-death* and, equally, sin (Kent Hieatt 1983).

Where, as Bataille observes, eroticism formed part of the religious and sacred rituals of antiquity (such as Dionysian worship), Christianity cleaved it from religion such that it became 'unclean' (1986, 74). Following Nietzsche, Themi notes this transition from 'the great copulations of the Olympian deities, and their fertility cults' to the Judeo Yahweh who, 'wanting to know nothing of sexual *jouissance*' enforced this 'ferocious ignorance' onto 'his children' (2014, 96), is the 'degenerative historical process' of Christian values upon the 'sensuousness' of the Real (98). Indeed, in reference to Demeter's coupling with Celeus (mortal king of Eleusis), Calasso observes (1994, 213) an early Christian Father (Gregory of Nazianzus) noting with 'vindictive zeal' that he 'is "ashamed" even to mention "those certain things that Demeter does and submits to",' denouncing the Eleusinian mysteries as making 'a sacred mystery of obscenity.' As such, in Themi's terms, Persephone's eroticism is no longer *affirmed* as sacred, divine coupling, but 'debased' by Christian values (2014, 82), but nevertheless finds expression in Christian cultures via the 'death and the maiden' theme (Bataille 1986). Here the erotic takes on the mantle of death in a negative image of Hades, as the Serpent/Satan in, for example, Hans Baldung Grien's 'Love and Death' (1510) and 'Death and the Woman' (1515).

We can see the inheritance of this value shift within feminist critiques of post-feminist sensibilities regarding the question of pleasure and productivity. As pleasure stands opposed to hard work on earth in exchange for a full afterlife in Christian theology, eroticism connotes the 'misfortune' or the 'trickery' of Satan (Bataille 1986, 79–80), tempting one away from a more 'pure' existence. I suggest the 'trickery' of Satan, here, as the seducer of the senses, denotes an unconscious association between pleasure and patriarchy in feminist thought. For 'trickery' is the rationale in feminist critiques of Hades – tricking Persephone into 'internalizing the enemy' (Guber 1979, 312) – that echoes in critiques of young women's sexuality as an internalization of a 'false' logic that 'patriarchy is pleasurable' (Douglas 2010, 12). Notably, Lacan argues Hades and Dionysus are 'one and the same' in that both are associated with ritual chthonic union and Bacchic ecstasy for which neither the 'Christian' nor 'rationalist' has any sympathy (SVII, 299). But where the Dionysian Real is foreclosed it returns, in Freud's terms, in 'distorted form' (SE22, 15) – in the Satanic figure of 'death' that is the unconscious place of eroticism in Judeo Christian cultures. As we saw with *Alias*, because Christian mythology grafts onto the 'name of the father' many unconsciously take those Christian values as the oppressive values of patriarchy. As such, the moral impulse to find and affirm 'good' feminist heroines suggests a problematic relation to pleasure – the Real of the drives – where it is unconsciously cathected to a distorted figure of Hades–as–Satan and thus, the 'patriarchal shadow.'

As with the erotic in the Christian era, the only way of expressing erotic *jouissance* in *Veronica Mars* becomes tied to death as a morality tale reminiscent of feminist moral censure of young women's sexuality. For despite many feminists claiming to be 'sex positive' such as Dines (2010), expressions of female eroticism in post-feminist cultures remain inadmissible under the suspicion it satisfies patriarchal desire – much like the 'trickery' of the devil in Christianity. Attwood notes that radical feminist work on pornography (primarily Dworkin 1999[1979]) has 'mask[ed] the variety of feminist discourse on sexual representation' because Dworkin's work is so 'well-established as a commonsense understanding of what pornography is, largely through repetition rather than verification,' it is the point from which most scholars must begin (2004, 8). We can see a similar influence in theorists like Rubin who, in *Thinking Sex* (2012[1984], 146–7) effaces the Real of the drives by arguing against 'essentialist' concepts of sex as deriving from any 'naturally' existing 'transcendental libido' that 'preexists social life,' in favour of 'historically specific social practices' that shape and *produce* sexual

'desires.' In this, Rubin marks out what is and is not accepted within feminist discourses on the topic of sex, and though she does so to lift the perceived oppression of patriarchal structures that produce particular desires, I would argue the *over*emphasis on patriarchy misses the erasure of the Real of the drives of Judeo Christian values; and the question remains, what of biology (in Rubin's own terms) is being 'shaped,' if nothing pre-exists society? The partial drives (oral, anal, genital) are, for Freud and Lacan, certainly, shaped by social and Symbolic forces, but as Themi notes (2014, 132), when the drives are repressed or foreclosed (unacknowledged), they can have harmful effects on both the individual and the social system that enforces repression. The result is that feminist work on sexuality – radical, liberal, 'positive,' or somewhere in between – remains caught in a feminist paradigm where female sexuality is represented, measured, and theorized within feminism's episteme of patriarchal relations, with the emphasis on representation and *construction* of cultural norms that, as I argued in Chapter 2, are now triangulated in the agenda feminism has made public.

This institutionalized influence – on theory, social life, legal systems and public policy – is evident in the work of Dines, whose account of pornography's effect on the sexual practices of heterosexual men and women (2010) expresses what is, to varying degrees, latent in many 'sex positive' feminist critiques of feminine sexuality. Because porn caters to heterosexual white male tastes, Dines argues, it forces women to either 'capitulate' to their partner's desire to 'play out porn sex on their body,' or avoid intercourse with 'men who use porn' (2010, xii). Dines does not engage meaningfully with women as desiring consumers of porn – or indeed, as performers in or producers of pornography as a legitimate expression of female eroticism. Where young women admit to difficulties in saying 'no' to sex, for example, it is assumed they lack the feminist 'agency' to do so against the social pressure of male desire (see Dines 2010, 100), rather than a lack of willpower to deny their own sexual urges (for whatever reason). Similarly, women might be 'seduced' into *emulating* porn stars – 'to look or act the part' (Dines 2010, xii) – but for Dines, this is neither empowering nor erotic. What Dines negates is the ways in which pornography articulates the *jouissance* in transgression precisely where it goes beyond normal limits – that realm of Symbolic laws and moral injunctions within which feminist concerns are located – a transgression that both expresses and gives access to the Real of the partial drives. Where feminists negate this *jouissance* by displacing it onto the desire of the patriarchal Other – 'rape by patriarchy' – feminine *jouissance* remains foreclosed.

This response that questions the young girl's enjoyment replicates Demeter's reaction upon Persephone's return: 'My child, tell me, you [did not taste] food [while below]?' (393), 'By what guile did the mighty Host-to-Many deceive you?' (404). Feminist critique, likewise, inherently assumes the erotic expression in post-feminist sensibilities is evidence of patriarchal 'stealth.' In many instances, moreover, this critique caries the implication that young women should not squander freedoms fought for them (by earlier generations) by *enjoying* too much, but be 'good' productive citizens, if not productive feminists. Where McRobbie's description of post-feminism blurs with criticism (2009), for example, the neo-Marxist influence on her critique emphasizes the moral 'Good' of Christian eras. Here, the institutionalization of capitalist ideology results in an address to the productivity of young women as 'can do' 'global girls' celebrated for their enthusiastic 'participation and training in the labour market' and potential 'earning capacity' (McRobbie 2009, 88–9).

McRobbie's descriptive language implies these girls have made appropriate use of the 'gift' feminism has given them but, by contrast, she *critiques* the phallic girl's 'openness to sexual adventure' (2009, 86), as a hedonistic 'leisure activity' that has been 'granted' to her (87) by feminism, as if a gift mishandled. That is, in McRobbie's critique, phallic girls 'adopt the habits of masculinity' and 'masculine sexual pleasures' (2009, 83), but do not own these experiences. Within the capitalist framework of the productive labour market, sex becomes a 'leisure activity' attributed an artificiality (if not superficiality) detracting women from achieving equality – but notably, an equality within a system that has already perverted eroticism and the Real from the sacred. Questions of pleasure and desire informing some second wave feminisms, such as Benjamin (1986, 1988; see also, Snitow et al. 1983; Vance 1984) have, with the epistemological breaks in post-feminism, been displaced by other concerns.[8] And Butler's emphasis on identity over pleasure, in fact, dovetails with feminist cultural criticism's accent on women's ideological 'false-consciousness' and its focus on the *representation* of 'positive' or 'negative' images according to 'a vocabulary of feminist concerns' (Brunsdon 2005, 113).[9]

Though considered post-feminist in the antithetical sense, Paglia has not been a central figure to feminist media studies, but her engagement with art and popular culture (1990) through Freud and Nietzsche illustrates how moral undercurrents in feminist responses to post-feminist sensibilities are the result of larger shifts in critical thought from the enlightenment onwards. For Paglia (1990, 2), feminism derives from

the 'liberal movements of the past two hundred years' that follow the Rousseauian belief in 'man's innate goodness,' and take violence and aggression as products of 'social deprivation' rather than innate qualities of the human condition. That is, feminism, as a discourse of the enlightenment, assumes the objects of its analysis (and liberatory impulse) are sovereign subjects, informed not by an unconscious or partial drives but by the ideals of the enlightenment. In asking how the human animal/infant comes to manage their drives (both violent and erotic) in order to enter into the social realm of language, laws, and taboos, Freud's work – personified in *Civilization and its Discontents* – argues precisely the opposite (SE21). Paglia thus observes that where contemporary feminism ignores Freud it addresses sexual inequality as 'a matter of social convention' to be rectified or redeemed (1990, 1).

Here, Nietzsche's critique of Western values (1989a, b) is of equal importance. For though Rousseau rejected the Christian concept of 'original sin,' Nietzsche exposes the West's continued reliance on Christianity's moral dualism between 'good' and 'bad' values to shape social life, despite increased secularization (see Nietzsche 1974, 343, 1989b, 24–56). Far from innocuous, where Themi follows Nietzsche's genealogy, he identifies the West's inheritance of an *inflated* moral 'Good' as, effectively, an 'occlusion' of the Real (and the Real of the drives) through a devaluing of the earthly world and the animal instincts of the human condition in preference for metaphysical ideals (2014, 66–85). That is, where the metaphysical 'Good' 'elide[s] the real of bodily nature' and puts in its place 'puritan fantasies' and 'idealisms' it revalues and *debases* the Real of the drives as 'vice' contra to any moral aim (Themi 2014, 82). This is the moral 'Good' that, in its excessive, inflated state, informs feminist discourses.

Persephone's story gives form to the Real of the drives, but prevailing feminist epistemologies (emphasizing an inflated moral 'Good') occlude our understanding of this sacred story. For Paglia, expressions of sexuality in art give form to the drive as it intersects with culture, but the repressive or celebratory form sexuality takes depends on the prevailing laws that shape it. Indeed, for Paglia, art plays out the struggle *between* culture and the drives such that the strivings of art are nothing but a constant 'defense against nature' (1990, 101). As we saw in the previous chapter, in contexts where the poststructuralist influence on feminism has foreclosed the Real, it returns as a *traumatic* encounter. In this, Neptune articulates unconscious conflicts in feminist thought regarding feminine *jouissance*, where Persephone's initiation becomes a traumatic story of rape, expressing the anxiety of being 'tricked' into satisfying

male desire, where such desire cannot be acknowledged in oneself. That is, rape becomes a symbol of negation.

## Feminine *jouissance* and sexuation

Lilly refuses the moral foreclosure on pleasure in the Real such that her haunting of Veronica is suggestive of the unconscious place her erotic enjoyment or *jouissance* in feminine sexuation has within Neptune's post-feminism. That is, Lilly's *jouissance* derives from an acknowledgement of the Real of the drives. As Lacan notes, what separates desire from *jouissance* is anxiety – an anxiety that is a defence against the Real (SX, 182). In transgressing this defence (where other's cannot) Lilly shows us where feminine *jouissance*, in the Real of the drives, is enjoyment at the level of being. The uncanny body of Lilly presents a feminine *jouissance* that, as with Persephone's *hieros gamos*, is no longer recognized by the feminist epistemologies informing the era of its iteration.[10] In her enjoyment in femininity, Lilly denotes acceptance of symbolic castration, a pleasure outside the political logic of 'equality,' for one built on recognition of her sexual difference. This is not to say Lilly's sexuality is 'authentic' femininity (a universal norm) – or a lost, 'pre-patriarchal' sexuality to be 'unearthed' like the goddess – but, that she has managed to locate herself in Symbolic terms without foreclosing the Real of her drives, and finds pleasure in this.

Commonly, Coats observes, adolescent narratives are organized around ethical foreclosures between the Real of the body, abjection, and the construction of identity within the Symbolic (2004, 159): they are narratives that attempt to construct a more 'fully realized Imaginary on which to build stable yet flexible Symbolic identities without disavowing the presence of the Real' (159–60). Lilly's (Siegfried's) body is sexually mature but still carries the blush of youth, and she appears to Veronica full of libidinal energy that is both abject and erotic: the bloody gash to her forehead is never covered over but offers a constant visual reminder of her corporality, an erotic body that is not sublimated in death. As with Nabokov's adolescent heroine *Lolita* (2000), Lilly leveraged 'her cultural value as an attractive, wealthy teenage girl to secure consumable erotic pleasure for herself' (Mayer 2011, 140). Yet where Lilly enjoyed, she died; Lilly's bloodied erotic corpse thus stands as a visual metaphor of what is not recognized in Veronica's story and indeed, in post-feminism: feminine *jouissance* in her specifically female body – a *jouissance* in the Real. Indeed, the Lilly of flashbacks presents her erotic body as a provocation – particularly her breasts – to repressive agents such as her parents ('The Wrath of Con' 1.4).

In feminist terms, Lilly's eroticism offers the 'phallic' sexuality critiqued as 'false consciousness' in that she creates an 'impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts' and acquiesces to a 'definition of sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status' (McRobbie 2009, 83). In many cases, however, the claim to 'false consciousness' is suggestive of a conflict over the Real of sexual difference that feminine sexuation responds to (and that Lilly achieves *jouissance* in). Like Greer (1999) and Whelehan (2000), Douglas identifies imagery of women's breasts in media culture as a return to the idea that women's biology determines their 'destiny' (2010, 10). That is, a return to ideas of an 'essential' difference in the systematic con-trick of 'the media's' (as an agent of patriarchy) to resurrect the logic 'that women are fundamentally different from men, and [therefore] can never be equal to them' (Douglas 2010, 11). Her critique implies imagery of women's breasts is neither authentic expression of female eroticism or evidence of 'equality' because it is designed to please men (and not women), but also presumes a more authentic representation of female sexuality to exist. Following this logic, however, a more authentic representation of female eroticism would have to originate from differences in the Real of women's bodies and psychic structure, but it is this Real of sexual difference or sexuation, identified as the site of inequality in poststructuralist feminisms.

For Lacan, though sexuation responds to the Real body, it is an imaginary *interpretation* of this body and, moreover, one's 'unconscious knowledge about desire' (Ragland 2004, 91). In Veronica's initial story, desire remains unconscious, but her detective work reveals Lilly's knowledge of feminine *jouissance* – the 'other story' – as she does with Meg. But when, in season three, Veronica attends university, the feminist response to post-feminist culture is given an explicit voice in the re-animation a formative moment in post-feminism, what Paglia calls the 'rape debates' of the 1980s and 1990s (1992a; Roiphe 1993).[11] This feminist discourse works against what Veronica has tried to make conscious, and I finish this chapter by showing the deadlock produced in these debates, for where they continue today in the life of many universities, they repeat what the Persephone symptom has come to stand in for: a foreclosure of the Real.

## Persephone detective? The feminist and the frat boy

Where Neptune's university 'Hearst' maintains the 'Greek system' on campus – of sororities, fraternities, and their feminist detractors at Lilith House – it gives voice to the post-feminist impasse, and Veronica's

investigations into the campus rapes, as Bolte suggests, expose 'the fissures of our cultural fabric' (2008, 94) by identifying in discourses surrounding these rapes the *methodological* impasse of feminist cultural criticism. Befitting McRobbie's definition of the post-feminist 'phallic girl' (2009, 83–7), who 'emulate[s] the assertive and hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men' the sorority girls relate to their sexuality as Lilly did (and as Parker does). Because they are over the age of consent, however, they are no longer censored by the law but, rather, by the Lilith House feminists. Just as feminists interpret Persephone's eating of the pomegranate seed as a metaphor for 'internaliz[ing] the enemy' (Guber 1979, 312), the Lilith House feminists treat the sorority girls as sexually unequal dupes of the fraternity – the 'patriarchal shadow of Hades' (Carlson 1997, 16) – and the campus rapist who they believe is a Pi Sig. Thus, the public sphere of the University is host to protest marches, rallies, and radio debates between the Lilith House feminists and the Pi Sigs, over what will be recognized as legitimate feminine sexuality within post-feminist sensibilities.

As a television heroine, Veronica's relation to feminism is strongly contested. Her character self-referentially draws on popular hard-boiled and female detectives of screen and literary traditions, and she is arguably the most successful reinvention of the popular American girl sleuth, Nancy Drew, for the new millennium.[12] For though Veronica is Nancy's opposite in that she is poor, socially outcast, difficult, and abrasive, descriptions of Nancy could easily pass for Veronica, who is also motherless, 'lives, with her understanding and trusting dad,' and is 'brilliant, poised, courageous, kind, attractive' – that is, 'free, white, and sixteen' (Mason 1975, 49–50).[13] Veronica's status *as* a 'feminist' is easily inferred. Her quip, 'crimes against women? It's a hobby' ('President Evil' 3.5), befits the female detective poised to identify the 'fissures' between feminism and culture (Tomc 1995; Walton and Jones 1999) where, as Mizejewski argues, the female detective 'expose[s] both the limitations of the postfeminist heroine and the nasty sex and gender issues that her presence supposedly precludes' (2005, 125). Described as a 'strong feminist protagonist' (Burnett and Townsend 2011, 96) with clear 'feminist' actions (2011, 163), Mayer sees Veronica embodying Haraway's Cyborg feminism (2011, 137) while Whitney attributes to her an 'individualist' feminism (2011, 163). Within this framework Neptune appears as 'patriarchy,' 'fingered, if not quite caught red handed' 'sell[ing] girls down the river' (Mayer 2011, 140). And, as Agha-Jaffar argues of Persephone, one might say Veronica is 'feminist protagonist' because at 'the beginning of the poem she is denied both voice and agency' but after she

'emerges from the Underworld, she is articulate, fluent, clear and confident' (2002, 52).

The temptation to read Veronica's Persephone story through a feminist lens is strong, as Agha-Jaffar further reads Korê's rape as an awakening to a 'feminist consciousness' (2002, 38) – implying rape is the consequence of patriarchy. In flashbacks to the previous year, Veronica is uncritically immersed in the 09er group and enjoys the advantages of being pretty and popular according to post-feminist sensibilities. She awakens to her Persephone status *after* her rape, recalling Carlson's suggestion that contemporary women '*begin* their lives in the realm of Hades and must live the myth backward, discovering their connections with the Mother and separating from a more familiar realm dominated by the patriarchal shadow of Hades' (1997, 16). After the rape, Veronica's cropped hair and punk aesthetic suggests her awakening has resulted in a critical awareness of post-feminist discourses and that she no longer 'internalizes' them like pomegranate seeds. But rather than waking to 'resurgent patriarchy' Veronica awakens to the impasse in epistemologies of her two stories. That is, in the tradition of the female detective, she 'embarks on a search for the criminal that ends up uncovering a network of problematic social and institutional mechanisms of which the crime itself is only one manifestation' (Tomc 1995, 46–7).

In fact, in her post-feminist position Veronica holds enough distance from feminism to allow her to expose its foreclosures. As we saw in Chapter 2, post-feminist heroines demonstrate their understanding that feminism is no longer viable in order to be taken as 'modern, sophisticated girl[s]' and take on 'an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations' (McRobbie 2009, 18). By no means uncritical of the post-feminist culture she inhabits, Veronica is, rather, an *outsider* (Bolte 2008, 94), who detects flaws in the Lilith House critique of post-feminist sensibilities. With her high-resolution digital camera, Veronica sees both closer and further, more clearly and more critically than the institutionalized feminism of Neptune. Veronica's ability to joke about the crimes against women – 'oh, rape humour, it never gets old!' ('Hi Infidelity' 3.6) – ensures she is distanced from the feminists, yet Veronica also trivializes Chip Diller's rape by the feminists, effectively ensuring she is not aligned with the 'frat boy' either (see 'Lord of the Pi's' 3.8). Indeed, she clears the Pi Sigs of raping Claire who faked it to frame the Pi Sigs ('President Evil' 3.5), infuriating the Lilith House feminists, who confront Veronica with a 'Greek chorus of feminist shame' ('Charlie Don't Surf' 3.4). But as Veronica points out,

she was employed to find the rapist, which should be everyone's goal ('Lord of the Pi's' 3.8).

**The straw feminist and the frat boy**

Whitney observes that 'America's understanding of rape is heavily influenced by the efforts of the 1970s women's movement' (2011, 153) and the creators of *Veronica Mars* 'self-consciously comment on' these discourses by putting them into play (154), particularly evident, I suggest, in the Greek system on campus. The girls of Lilith House, Nish (Chastity Dotson), Fern (Cher Ferreyra), and Claire (Krista Kalmus) are described in the series as 'militant feminists' ('Wichita Linebacker' 3.3); they take women's poetry classes, hold 'take back the night' rallies, and show indignant outrage when Pi Sigs taunt them with a liberal celebration of sexuality (see 'Welcome Wagon' 3.1). They fake a rape in order to frame the Pi Sig fraternity of the campus rapes, and actually rape Pi Sig Chip Diller (David Tom) by drugging him to insert a plastic egg (coded message inside) into his rectum, shaving his head and leaving him naked on the campus lawn ('Lord of the Pi's' 3.8). They are, in popular cultural terms, 'straw feminists': underdeveloped characters who are 'over the top, crazy and extremist' that, Sarkeesian argues, caricature feminism to undermine its goals and present a fantasy of 'post-feminism' that 'only exists in Hollywood' (2011).[14] In this, straw feminists 'separate female leads who are smart and funny and witty – in this case Veronica – from any association with feminism' (Sarkeesian 2011).

Yet, if the Lilith House characters are straw feminists, then in their articulation of the feminist response to post-feminist sensibilities, Dick becomes a 'straw' misogynist: the image of patriarchy constructed in a feminist critique of post-feminism. As a key figure in the fraternity on campus, Dick personifies the 'provocation to feminism, a triumphant gesture on the part of resurgent patriarchy' (McRobbie 2009, 85) connoted in Neptune's secret male societies, the 'Tritons' of Neptune High, and Hearst University's 'The Castle.' As a nickname, Dick denotes a blunt symbolization of his narrative function: the aggressive penis of the rapist and, like his father Richard ('big Dick'), he takes considerable pleasure in tormenting his younger brother 'Beaver' (a colloquial reference for vagina) metaphorically playing out his pleasure in teasing women. Dick's wisdom is sexual and hedonistic, as he tells Veronica, 'sometimes you don't need the prettiest horse, just the one that will let you ride bareback [without a condom]' ('I Am God' 2.18). Yet Dick

is simultaneously depicted as innocuous and somewhat affectionately referred to as 'uncomplicated' in his misogyny. His nickname is also a reminder that he is 'a dick' in colloquial teenage parlance – an idiot or 'jackass' – and, that he functions at the level of the uncensored genital drive. When he emails the sex-video of Veronica and Piz to his entire address book and nonchalantly justifies it as 'instinct' ('I always email porn. When it's *good*'), Veronica acknowledges the futility of arguing with him (as with the feminists): 'it's like you're this giant Jackass Piñata, begging for someone to beat the candy out of you' ('The Bitch is Back' 3.20).

Reference to Mulvey's 'male gaze' in the series denotes the way in which feminist criticism no longer 'liberates' the woman in the text, when such ideas already structure that text. The naked photo-protest in the school newspaper, for instance, where Lilith House women hold the sign: 'We go to Hearst, go ahead and rape us' presents a composite image of the post-feminist impasse: the use of feminist thought to critique a world that has also absorbed and revised this critique. When the Pi Sigs take a picture of themselves (topless, in drag) with an amended sign 'No thanks, except maybe the blonde in the middle,' they too openly engage in the discourses of feminist theory, recalling early 90s advertising that McRobbie suggests (2009, 16–17), 'call[ed] feminism to account' through 'ironic' engagement with Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory. When Logan comments enthusiastically on the nudity of the protest images, Veronica deconstructs its feminist meaning: 'if you have words written on you, it's not nudity, it's political speech – taking control of one's body to turn the objectifying male gaze back on itself.' When Logan stops her mid-sentence, 'OK, no more college for *you*' ('Wichita Linebacker' 3.3), he reminds us of McRobbie's observation, that post-feminist women are 'called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl' (2009, 18).

Veronica demonstrates her understanding of this contract after stumbling on a 'take back the night' rally and facetiously quipping, 'Women: bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch, bitch' ('Welcome Wagon' 3.1). The Pi Sigs interrupt the rally with Dick miming sex with a blow-up-doll on stage. As a post-feminist heroine Veronica is 'educated in irony' and though not outraged, neither is she supportive, in McRobbie's terms, she 'appreciates the layers of meaning ... [and] gets the joke' (2009, 17). In this, Veronica's post-feminist status allows her to keep a critical distance from feminism (its episteme and methods) such that she can more consciously reflect

on it. Indeed, what post-feminist sensibilities offer – whether informed by the antithetical, epistemological, or historical breaks with feminism – is precisely a *distance* that allows for reflection.

Consequently, though Veronica initially appears to support a feminist critique, it is not long before she uncovers the deadlock of this approach. She is thrilled to be employed by Nish (of Lilith House), on the campus newspaper, to investigate a rumour the sorority house is helping frat boys sexually humiliate female pledges ('My Big Fat Greek Rush Week' 3.2). But when Nish decides to publish her own agenda based on the little information Veronica sourced, Veronica realizes the Lilith House brand of feminism offers a rigid ideological position that adopts a pre-determined framework and, like analysis of post-feminisms, produces pre-determined results.

Significantly, the sorority girls' post-feminist sensibilities undermine Mulvey's male-gaze theory (1989) of a unidirectional power structure where the one who looks controls the active/passive dialectic. As the articulation of 'resurgent patriarchy,' for example, Dick animates feminist fears that capitulating to male desire will 'rob' women of their authentic desire. His part in Veronica's rape animates feminist readings of Persephone's rape that, Agha-Jaffar puts it, teaches Persephone her 'proper role consists of submission to male hegemony' (2002, 145), and his 'devilish' characteristics are reminiscent of the serpent's 'trickery' in Christian ideology. The construction of rapes in the narrative appears to produce *all* young women as 'potential victims of sex crimes' (Harris 2008, 153) but almost never as agents of their own sexual desire, that is, without negative consequences, and in this I suggest the series animates the rape fantasies of feminist discourses and adolescent Persephone complexes described by Kulish and Holtzman (2008, 148). For the post-feminist adolescent, sexual adulthood means entering the mother's realm; as I argue in the following chapter, this may refer to the real mother (who may or may not be feminist), but also denotes the metaphoric space of feminism in a post-feminist heroine's world in the sense that, becoming a sexual adult means entering a space that feminism has made claims on – that territory of what it means to be 'woman' and, moreover, what is and is not permitted as regards sex within the meta-narrative of woman that feminism 'has made public.' For where *Veronica Mars* re-animates America's rape debates – especially connoted in the 'take back the night' rallies on campus – the series strongly references Dworkin's work on sex that has, Attwood notes, been central to 'academic, institutional, and public understandings of sexual

representation, working to frame and structure most discussions about this type of representation since the 1980s' (2004, 8). Depending on the transference between post-feminist adolescents and feminism – where feminism functions as a matraphor – entry into this space, I suggest, can have distorting effects on young women's sexual impulses, such that they can only find expression 'in fearful rape fantasies' (Kulish and Holtzman 2008, 149).

The recording of this rape fantasy is of particular importance, for even when consenting, as Veronica, Lilly, and Carmen all do, the unauthorized recording of their sexual activity seemingly functions to rob them of this consent.[15] Like the poet of the *Hymn*, Veronica's consent is appropriated by another and 'framed by his agenda' (Suter 2005, 21) or, in this instance, *feminism's* agenda, for when Dworkin spoke at a 'take back the night rally' in 1979, she famously claimed that romance is 'rape embellished with meaningful looks' (Levy 2007, xxi). Here, *Veronica Mars* invokes the implications of Dworkin's rhetoric: that no woman can consent – even when consenting – a rhetoric resonating with feminism's 'false consciousness' critique. The post-feminist sorority girls, however, are not concerned with the gaze of the Other in so much as they can acknowledge where their own enjoyment resides in it. As Bonnie puts it, Dick is simply 'another cute frat boy' to have fun with ('Lord of the Pi's' 3.8), and though Dick is outraged that Bonnie had sex with another Pi Sig, Bonnie is unconcerned: Dick does not rob her of enjoyment. In this sense, Bonnie shows us (as Lilly did), what Lacan suggests structures feminine *jouissance*, where 'the desire of the Other is the means by which her *jouissance* will have an object' (SX, 191) – for Bonnie (and Lilly), this is not restricted to a single Other. Where enjoyment in the desire of the Other is negated, however, it 'makes its way to consciousness' Freud suggests, in 'distorted form' (SE19, 235–6): in *Veronica Mars,* it can only be experienced through 'fearful rape fantasies.'

**From innocent Korê to 'thoughtful Persephone'**

As with Persephone, Veronica must emerge from the underworld as a new identity, a mature female subject who accounts for her body in culture. In adolescence, the subject is initiated into the social codes and cultural epistemologies of their Symbolic, but in *Veronica Mars*, these codes are at an impasse. Veronica's narrative is embedded in debates over feminine sexuality in post-feminist cultures – debates now absorbed into the popular sphere via the triangulation of feminisms and the media

(especially evident in the references to 'the male gaze' and 'take back the night' rallies in the series).

Traditionally, the hard-boiled detective 'sets out to investigate a crime but invariably finds that he must go beyond the solution to some kind of personal choice or action' (Cawelti 1977, 142–3), a motif that resonates throughout Veronica's story. Yet on the morning of Veronica's graduation from high school ('Not Pictured' 2.22), she fantasizes about returning to the status quo before her journey into the underworld: she dreams of her life if Lilly were still alive and as if 'old' Veronica had not been raped and initiated into the impasse. Logan pinpoints the flaw in this fantasy when (in the dream) he indulgently tells Veronica, 'I love you, but you have to be the most gullible girl I've ever met.' Consequently, Veronica realizes returning to the fantasy of her previous existence is not simply impossible, but *undesirable* because of what she has discovered through the process of her transformation.

No longer an innocent girl, Veronica becomes the 'thoughtful' Persephone of the *Hymn* (see lines 359 and 370) and attempts to break the impasse for other young Korês. She helps Duncan kidnap his (and Meg's) daughter and escape the country, in order that Meg's baby not be brought up in the strict parental religion that suppresses feminine *jouissance*, and she exchanges herself for the body of the victim – a Korê-like 'old' Veronica – in the final rape scene (suggesting she has overcome her own 'fearful rape fantasies'). The series nevertheless ends with Veronica discovering that members of 'The Castle' are responsible for recording and distributing her sex-tape with Piz; her final actions involve cracking Jake Kane's computer to retrieve the list of Castle alumni before giving the files to Nish to publish. In Jake's mansion Veronica gazes upon large portraits of Lilly and Duncan, her sister/self and brother/lover, who have both been exiled in relation to their knowledge of feminine *jouissance*, or actions sustaining knowledge of feminine *jouissance* incompatible with the secular 'sacred myth' (Brooks 1994, 5) of feminist episteme. Veronica ends the series alone in a final shot recalling *Ally McBeal*'s final scene, and the exit of Sydney Bristow (albeit with husband and children) from the community in *Alias*.

Veronica's lonely plight is testament to the uncertainty of the network's decision to renew the series but also illustrates the difficulty of this narrative going forward: it has no scope to develop into anything but a renewal of the impasse. The necessity of the heroine to, once again, end the series alone presents a need to change the terms of the story, to move beyond feminism and patriarchy and the deadlock produced by

these frameworks. It is this narrative impetus to 'change her story' I turn to next, in *Grey's Anatomy*. Where *Grey's Anatomy* presents the heroine's Persephone complex tied up in a 'feminist' mother Demeter, the series animates the post-feminist impasse as a real, *historical* impasse caught in the Oedipal fixations of the mother-daughter plot. Here, the heroine has absorbed feminist ideas such that they are now unconscious, and conflict with consciously held beliefs about women, motherhood, and work.

# 6

# Persephone as Historical Impasse: 'Confrontation and Accommodation' of the Post-feminist Heroine

In contrast to the stark framing of post-feminist extremes in *Veronica Mars*, the romantic dramedy of *Grey's Anatomy* articulates, Levine argues, 'a feminist-friendly fiction or *fantasy*' that ushers in a 'new phase in postfeminist culture' (2013, 140–6; original emphasis) that, I suggest, presents post-feminism in the historical sense, of having moved on to 'different problems and concerns' (Gill 2007, 249).[1] For while feminism appears to have 'truly changed' this world (Levine 2013, 146), it remains historically distanced from heroine Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo), in the figure of her mother. Strikingly, however, the themes of Persephone unfold as real psychic symptoms for Meredith, who self-diagnoses her constant malaise as a response to: 'the mother thing, the father thing, the sister thing [and] the dying and coming back to life thing' ('Kung Fu Fighting' 4.6).

Where Meredith's Persephone story is at an impasse – an unresolved conflict with her mother, pioneer feminist surgeon Ellis Grey (Kate Burton) – elements of her Persephone complex provide an allegory for what underpins the *historical* aspect of the post-feminist impasse: the mother-daughter transference. A 'raging goddess' Demeter, Ellis is an unbending figure who, since developing early onset Alzheimer's, does not recognize her daughter, and it becomes clear that Alzheimer's compounds a history of misrecognition between mother and daughter. In this, *Grey's Anatomy* animates the dynamic between feminist and post-feminist women as a historical conflict of misrecognition akin to the 'confrontation' between Persephone and Demeter as independent

goddesses with a similar religious province in the pre-Homeric era, 'accommodated' in the *Hymn*, Suter argues, by situating them as mother and daughter (2005, 118). Here I take up Suter's metaphor to argue, that, in accommodating the impasse between feminists and post-feminist women via the allegory of a mother-daughter Persephone plot, *Grey's Anatomy* gives shape to themes underpinning this 'confrontation' that, if analysed, can contribute to our understanding of the impasse and subsequently offer a more productive way forward to address it.

Meredith's Persephone complex consolidates the by now familiar symptoms analysed in this book; what is unique is that it shows us where conscious and unconscious ideas about feminism entangled in the post-feminist impasse are conflicted by the personal drama, for her complex is more explicitly transposed onto a 'real' drama between a feminist mother and her post-feminist daughter. As I argued in Chapter 3, *Grey's Anatomy* does not offer the 'social realism' valued as 'quality TV,' but stages a '*psychical* reality' (Cowie 1997, 129; my emphasis) that, in its melodramatic 'improbability' allows things to be 'brought to the surface which otherwise would remain hidden' (Ang 1985, 68). Indeed, as Kendrick notes (2007, 37), *Grey's* presents an 'honest' depiction of the familial dynamics of Ellis' dedication to career and its impact on Meredith.

In this *Grey's Anatomy* shows us where unconscious aspects of a Persephone complex can inform, and become cathected to, feminist ideas, identifications, and thought, the analysis of which offers us another perspective on what post-feminism can tells us *about* feminism. For while Ellis was preoccupied with her surgical education at the height of second wave feminism, Meredith was left, like Korê, to become the object of exchange among the gods; yet an underworld lord does not abduct Meredith and unlike Zeus, her father, Thatcher Grey (Jeff Perry), plays no role in her existence. Abandoned by mother *and* father, Meredith remains a nameless Korê who, as Meredith puts it, does not 'have a story' but is 'just a girl in a bar' ('Time Has Come Today' 3.1). As a response to this rejection, however, Meredith has made her own way to Hades where, as a rebellious daughter she takes on her mother's (surgical) province and anoints herself as a Persephone figure who refuses any one Hades over many. Here, her ambivalence toward life and self-destructive behaviour earns her the nickname 'Death' (see 'These Ties That Bind' 5.8).[2] In fact, Meredith's name is a phonetic reminder of her self-destructive hedonism: with tequila bottle in hand and a trail of one-night stands in her wake, she is literally the image of

a Merry-death – a *jouissance* in the death drive (see 'Shake Your Groove Thing' 1.5).[3]

Meredith's Persephone symptoms express what Freud notes is a 'remarkable' attribute of the melancholic, an ability to surmount 'the life instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life' (SE14, 246), such that Meredith actually dies in season three, existing in a type of underworld ('Walk on Water' 3.15 and 'Drowning on Dry Land' 3.16). Where this motivates an exploration of her symptoms – 'the mother thing' and 'the father thing' – the series articulates Meredith's Persephone complex as an internalization of the lost object, here not simply 'the mother' but what has been foreclosed by the mother: love, recognition, the paternal function, and thus, where she articulates a form of second wave feminism, symbolic castration, or recognition of sexual difference. Crucially, Meredith's identification with the mother is unconscious because her act of becoming a surgeon was an act of defiance. In the post-feminist allegory of rejecting mother/feminism, Meredith's relation to feminism is similarly unconscious.

Ellis' Alzheimer's, however, allows the series to confront what is unconscious (and thus, sensitive material) in the post-feminist impasse because it positions Ellis as existing in her past memories – her years as one of the first female surgical interns in the 1970s. The displacement onto Alzheimer's effectively defuses the onus of blame and discharges the personal nature of Meredith's rapprochements towards her feminist mother (even though it produces new ones) such that Meredith (and the viewer) can explore this impasse more freely. Where dementia is a symptom of Alzheimer's it offers another metaphor for this impasse. Irigaray's study of the language of dementia patients (1973) theorized they are incapable of creating new dialogue and, instead, live in past discourses: discourses without creative possibilities in the present. In this, Ellis presents Meredith with the feminist discourses of the past in response to the present, *enacting* the post-feminist impasse; by criticizing Meredith's post-feminist sensibilities through the 'old' feminist framework, I suggest we can see how this particular way of seeing the world forecloses other 'creative' possibilities.[4] Where this impasse of recognition plays out female Oedipal processes (that require the mother-child dyad be broken for recognition of the child as an independent subject), it parallels the need for a *theoretical* separation from feminist discourses in order to break the impasse. This is posed literally in *Grey's Anatomy*, in the heroine's deathly existence where she cannot confront her mother because she is mentally unavailable – mirroring the foreclosure of theories of feminine identity in post-feminist discourses.

In a very literal manner then, *Grey's Anatomy* points to the foreclosure of theory seeking to understand the mother-daughter relationship identified in Chapter 2 (specifically, Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis) as contributing to a *historical* impasse between feminist discourses and post-feminist women. The allegorical need to break away from the mother-as-feminism here is neither hostile nor disrespectful – as Levine argues *Grey's* depicts a world 'changed' by feminism – but simply necessary for the heroine's existence, a tension increasing in each Persephone story in this book. As Meredith puts it to the mother of another Korê, 'you have to change her story' ('No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5.21).

Focusing on the first six seasons where Meredith's Persephone complex is at the fore of her narrative, I begin with Meredith's Persephone symptoms – the impasse with 'the mother thing' – before turning to the allegory this complex provides for the relationship between feminist and post-feminist women.[5] When Meredith addresses this impasse (through psychotherapy), other parts of her Persephone story emerge – specifically, the 'father thing' and the significance of Hades – that have been rejected by feminist readings of the myth and Meredith's mother alike. Yet once the impasse has been confronted and accommodated, difficulties remain in Meredith's ability to move forward: here I argue that, while the maternal conflict in Meredith's Persephone complex has been addressed, the unconscious place of feminism within it remains.

## Meredith Grey's Anatomy: Persephone as symptom

As the title of the series suggests, the narrative is an examination of the anatomy of its namesake, Meredith Grey. Riffing on Henry Gray's 1858 medical textbook, *Gray's Anatomy*, that remains the basis of contemporary revised editions (Gray 2011), 'anatomy' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the artificial separation of the parts of an organized body, in order to discover their position, structure, and economy,' a 'dissection' or 'detailed examination or analysis' (Onions 1956). As such, the title implies the occupation of the series is the dissection and detailed examination of the parts that make up 'Meredith' – that is, the examination of Meredith's *psychic* anatomy.

As with *Alias* and *Veronica Mars*, the *mise en scéne* of *Grey's Anatomy* anchors this examination in a narrative space redolent with themes of the Greek pantheon. Surgeons at the top of their field are metaphoric 'gods' (see 'Scars and Souvenirs' 3.18, 'Before and After' 5.15, and 'An Honest Mistake' 5.16) who, with the power to determine the fate of

the mortal lives under their care, roam the prestigious private teaching hospital 'Seattle Grace' where Meredith is a surgical intern. Not only was Meredith raised in this space ('Sanctuary' 6.23), her mother was 'one of the Greats' – '*the* Ellis Grey' – 'one of the first big chick surgeons,' and 'a living legend' for inventing several surgical techniques ('A Hard Day's Night' 1.1). Later described as 'a force to be reckoned with' ('Six Days' 3:11), Ellis garners the type of reverence given to the 'awesome' 'mighty Demeter' of the *Hymn* (line 75), in a 'rage' (see 'Make Me Lose Control' 2.3). As with Persephone, Meredith is 'Royally inbred' within this world (see 'A Hard Day's Night' 1.1). Though the chief of surgery, Richard Webber (James Pickens, Jr) is not Meredith's father, as her mother's ex-lover and the overseer of this (surgical) world, he clearly embodies the Zeus figure in Meredith's story (see 'Testing 1-2-3' 4.24 and 'No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5.21). As with Zeus in 'his unfailing knowledge' (lines 321), Richard is the all-powerful 'father' to these surgical gods, described as 'the tall one […] watching over everything, over everyone' ('Kung Fu Fighting' 4.6). And, in a poignant nod to Greek myth, Meredith is eventually dubbed 'Medusa' by her interns for being 'a monster of mythic proportions' ('Going, Going, Gone' 9.1).

As with many post-feminist Persephone narratives (and, indeed, the Homeric pantheon), the series is self-consciously preoccupied with each character's 'story,' drawing attention to the significance of the subject's history in the psychoanalytic clinic and thus, to the viewing practices that position the audience as detective and co-producer of *meaning* in the heroine's story. When Meredith informs a woman that her husband is dying, for example, she realizes 'I'm the one who handed her the worst day of her life. In *her* story, that's who I am' ('Crash in to Me (1)' 4.9); the chief tells Meredith he is *not* 'the villain in [her] story' ('Freedom (2)' 4.17), and a trauma surgeon insists his patient – a homeless man – must 'have a story, we *all* have a story' ('These Ties That Bind' 5.8). Meredith's belief that she does not have a story presents a symptom that, in Brooks' terms, 'seeks a cure' (1994, 6), where both Meredith and the audience work to decipher the 'repressed secrets and traumas' of her story. For it is clear Meredith is not a girl *without* a story, but, rather, that she does not know or understand and therefore cannot yet *symbolize* her story.

As the origins of 'textual desire' (Brooks 1985, 37) then, what is Meredith's story? What is the significance of her mother's symbolic death (to Alzheimer's) for this story? Meredith refers to her youth as 'the adventures of Death and Die' ('These Ties that Bind' 5.8) and, indeed, *Grey's Anatomy* is distinct from earlier post-feminist heroines in that rape – real or symbolic – is not part of it. In 'The First Cut

Is the Deepest' (1.2), the rape victim Alison parallels something of Meredith's Persephone story in that, having just moved to Seattle she is a young woman 'alone in the world,' but though it is not yet clear what Meredith's story will be, it is not Alison's story of rape. In Levine's terms, the fantasy of *Grey's* is that 'the active and satisfying sexual and romantic lives of these characters' who are 'more concerned with sexual hijinks than medical' tasks, 'challenge the postfeminist assumption that career and interpersonal happiness' are contradictory (2013, 141). Feminist discourse strongly frames Alison's rape story, and where Meredith finds herself bound (by evidence protocol) to carry the partial penis found in Alison's intestines until the police arrive, we see the symbolic re-organizing of this world according to a feminist fantasy in that, the only person *not* permitted the penis/phallus is the white male.[6] Here the effect of feminism on this world has shaped the heroine too. When Meredith puts it that she is 'just sitting here, with my penis' (in an evidence cooler), she bespeaks an irony that the woman now has the phallus, and I suggest that, where the series shows feminism as having 'changed this world' – 'in principle, if not in fact' to borrow McRobbie's phrase (2004, 513) – it is so taken-for-granted it has become *unconscious*.

That is, just as Meredith's identification with her mother is unconscious (as I will explore shortly), Meredith's articulation of feminist themes remains unconscious, for Meredith is *consciously* distanced from the strident second wave feminist rhetoric of her mother. In contrast to Levine's claim that *Grey's* is more feminist fantasy than a post-feminist 'compromise' because 'the women of *Grey's* are rarely punished for their professional focus' (2013, 140–1), I argue that, while women are not *punished* for professional focus, the narrative openly questions this focus, in a form of Arthurs' post-feminist 'revisionism' (2004, 130). Meredith's post-feminist Persephone complex testifies precisely to the need for a 'corrective' reworking of second wave beliefs regarding women and work, as the consequences of these beliefs are felt by subsequent generations. For Meredith is, in Levine's words 'flawed, beset with troubles, and frequently unhappy' (2013, 141) such that, in many respects, she is an updated version of Ally McBeal: she 'cries during sex, eats cold pizza for breakfast, and covers pimples with Hello Kitty Band-Aids' (Rayworth 2007, 124).

Indeed, when Meredith cries during sex ('What Have I Done to Deserve This?' 2.18), we can see the extent to which she does not understand her own Persephone symptoms but, rather, acts them out. For in 'acting out'

the subject makes 'an appeal to the Other' for analysis or interpretation, the condition of which is, Lacan notes, that a transference is in place (SX, 125). As Freud puts it, when the subject constantly experiences the 'same emotional relationship' within new encounters, the structure and emotion of an earlier, primary relationship has been brought across or 'transferred on to the new person' (SE16, 441–2). When Meredith cries during sex with George (T. R. Knight), she acts out her transference with her father where it is cathected to Derek (Patrick Dempsey), who has repeated her father's abandonment of her – inspiring the trail of one-night-stands that George joins – a triangulation completed for the viewer when Ellis confuses George for Meredith's father in her Dementia ('Make Me Lose Control' 2.3). I suggest, however, that we might also read Meredith's gesture here (crying during sex) as an appeal to the audience with whom there is also a transference. For while, as Lacan notes, symptoms are 'sufficient unto' themselves, in that, they make no 'appeal to the Other' and, rather, constitute the subject's *jouissance* (SX, 125), in the context of television drama, Meredith's symptoms are effectively designed by the writers – as with her 'acting out' in this scene – as 'an appeal to the Other' in the form of the audience.

Meredith's Persephone symptoms, by contrast, require a more unconscious form of expression in the narrative. Lacan puts it that when speech 'stumbles,' a gap where 'something *other* demands to be realized' becomes evident to the analyst (SXI, 25; my emphasis) – here, the audience – but where Meredith lacks Ally's loquaciousness and her symptoms are not visually dramatized, like Ally's dancing baby, what is unconscious – what 'demands to be realized' – in her story is an enigma. The patients under her care, however, are bodies with physical symptoms that present metaphors for Meredith's *psychical* conflicts, directing the viewer to Meredith's history where 'recollection' itself 'is blocked by resistance' (Brooks 1985, 98). The daughter so desperate to impress her mother she has her stomach stapled in Mexico, for instance, hints at Meredith's simultaneous rebellion and unconscious identification with her mother ('The Self Destruct Button' 1.7), while the boy covered in cement symbolizes Meredith's progress with therapy: a massive blow is needed to 'break through' ('Freedom (1)' 4.16).

The most repetitive narrative pointing to Meredith's symptoms is the abundance of abandoned Korê figures who fill in, agitate, and act as catalysts for the symbolization of Meredith's story.[7] In this, the issue of neglect in Meredith's history is hinted at when she observes, 'there's this baby up in the nursery, he's brand-new. No one's neglected or damaged him yet. How do we get from there to here?' ('The First Cut Is

the Deepest' 1.2). Similarly, Meredith begs the mother of sick premature quintuplets not to leave the hospital: 'your daughters need you' 'they need their mother,' as if voicing a personally felt frustration ('Owner of a Lonely Heart' 2.11). The frequent image of Meredith's distressed face suggests she is one of these abandoned Korês; when Ellis is brought to the hospital and becomes lucid, Meredith is visually captured hiding behind doorways like the Korê figures who frequent her narrative (see 'Make Me Lose Control' 2.3). And though we learn Meredith 'doesn't talk,' viewers – as if the analysts of Meredith's symptom – are given hints to its contents through flashbacks and recovered memories, what Lacan calls 'archival documents' or 'legends' that form the subject's history (E, 50–1), such as Meredith's reverie of childhood in 'Time Has Come Today' (3.1) and 'The Time Warp' (6.15). Thus, despite her age and professional advancement, Meredith's abandonment as Korê is unconscious, such that she remains at a psychic impasse.

The narrative highlights the unconscious place of Meredith's symptoms by showing, through her voice-over (broad aphorisms that bookend each episode) that she has significant clarity and wisdom. Subsequently, even as she tells another Korê figure, 'I don't talk either, when bad things happen' ('Walk on Water' 3.15), her wry, often resigned reflections on life such as, 'here's the truth about the truth: it hurts, so ... we lie' ('Tell Me Sweet Little Lies' 2.14), show acute insight into human behaviour. Her Persephone complex is thus a conflict between her (conscious) voice over and her (unconscious) inability to comprehend her self-identified Persephone symptoms – an allegory for the way in which conscious ideas about feminism may conflict with unconsciously held beliefs (informed by the subject's own history) about women.

Where Meredith's Persephone qualities are literal in her relation to death they point to her complex as a melancholic depression over a lost object. From the beginning of the series she is in a relationship with Derek (as a surgical 'god') that denotes Persephone's *hieros gamos* – sacred sexual union between two divine principles (Suter 2005, 102) – but, significantly, it is not until Meredith confronts the impasse with her mother that she is able to openly *enjoy* this relationship. Indeed, her reluctance to commit suggests what lies beneath Meredith's melancholic impasse is an unresolved relation to castration, in that where she has unconsciously identified with her mother's feminism, Meredith is reluctant to occupy a passive feminine position. As Freud notes, the unresolved 'wish for a penis' can be 'the source of outbreaks of acute depression' in later life, and often denotes the 'bedrock' of a woman's analysis where the analysand is convinced 'that the analysis will be of no use and that

nothing can be done to help her' (SE23, 252). And indeed, Meredith is quite resistant to analysis; in the interim, her frequent brushes with death place her between life and death, where she identifies as 'dark and twisty' on the inside ('Time Has Come Today' 3.1). Her psychologist Dr Wyatt (Amy Madigan), points out that whereas most people 'run away from this line between life and death,' Meredith 'seem[s] to stand on it and wait for a strong wind to sway [her] one way or the other' ('Losing My Mind' 4.15) – evident when she sticks her hand into an open chest cavity housing live, unstable (homemade) ammunition ('It's the End of the World' (1) 2.16). Similarly, when Meredith drowns, it is not Hades surging up to grab her, but her apathy towards life pulling her down. As she later acknowledges, though she fought at first, for a moment she allowed herself to think, 'what's the point?' and gave up her struggle ('Some Kind of Miracle' 3.17).

While surgeons attempt to resuscitate her, Meredith exists in a space suggestive of Hades' underworld. Characters significant to Meredith who have died exist as underworld shades, 'recognizable in shape and form' and 'transcending' 'time and space' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 115), providing cryptic insight into her symptoms. Here Meredith's psychic inertia presents a significant corollary to Freud's description of the melancholic and, as part of her Persephone complex, shows us a critical aspect of the post-feminist impasse. Whereas in mourning – where what is lost is conscious and the world is 'impoverished' by this loss – in melancholia, it is the ego that is impoverished because the melancholic identifies with the lost object's regard, separating themselves from their own ego to denigrate it with the critical judgment of the Other. As Freud puts it, the melancholic presents themselves as 'worthless, incapable of any achievement' and 'commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy' (SE14, 246). And in fact, during psychotherapy, Meredith's doctor points to the origins of Meredith's melancholy: 'your mother told you that you were a waste of space on this planet, the problem is, you believed her' ('Losing My Mind' 4.15). Evidently Meredith has returned this regard back on herself, announcing in the pilot that, in comparison to her mother's great achievements 'I'm screwed' and identifying as 'self-destructive and self-loathing to an almost pathological degree' ('Yesterday' 2.18); indeed, she is 'the one at family reunions everybody was embarrassed to talk about' ('Owner of a Lonely Heart' 2.11).

But as Freud notes, while the melancholic 'knows *whom* he has lost' he or she may not 'know *what* he has lost in him' (SE14, 245) such that Meredith's inability to speak suggests, in Freud's terms, that her

melancholia denotes the loss has been 'withdrawn from consciousness' (SE14, 245). Meredith's 'dark and twisty' outlook is contrasted with half-sister Lexi's (Chyler Leigh) 'bright and shiny' persona, whose story echoes Meredith's in many ways – she is also 'the girl in the bar' ('Testing 1-2-3' 3.24) – but for one significant aspect: both Lexi's mother and father loved her. While Meredith knows this, what this loss hides remains stubbornly unconscious.

**Two goddesses, two eras, one (forgotten) story**

As with pre-Homeric Persephone and Demeter who share 'similar areas of competence' of 'regulating the earth's fertility' (Suter 2005, 115–33), Meredith and Ellis share prowess over similar professional territory, but come from different locations (*historical* rather than geographic). As an allegory for the relationship between feminist and post-feminist women, their relationship dramatizes the way in which feminist women see themselves in post-feminist women (both occupy the position, 'woman'), but cannot see where this similarity stops because the post-feminist woman's experience – the historical context of her story – is different.

As with many post-feminist mother-daughter couplings, the twinning of Meredith and Ellis is both visual and character driven.[8] In the pilot episode, for example, Chief Webber recognizes Meredith without introduction, 'I'd know you anywhere: you're the spitting image of your mother' (see 'A Hard Day's Night' 1.1), and her estranged father Thatcher admits after seeing Meredith for the first time in 20 years 'she looks so much like her mother' ('The Name of the Game' 2.22).[9] In terms of status, Meredith accrues enough acumen and skill as a surgeon to suggest she will one day match her mother's: she impressively diagnoses two medical cases in her first shift ('A Hard Day's Night' 1.1), and becomes known as 'the one to beat' ('The Name of the Game' 2.22). When Meredith creates a clinical trial for a radical new method of treating brain tumours it is dubbed 'the stuff of legends' ('Freedom (2)' 4.17).

Notably, where Meredith and Ellis share a similar 'stories' in their careers, they also *react* in similar ways, recalling the conflation of mythic materials in the *Hymn*. In her grief, Demeter tells the daughters of Keleos a story of abduction and rape by pirates (lines 119–32) that Suter observes is actually the story of Demeter in Arcadian cult (2005, 109). Demeter is raped by Poseidon, after which she dresses in black and hides herself in a cave 'where no god can find her' and the earth stops producing fruit (Suter 2005, 109). Once discovered (by Pan), Zeus sends Moirai to 'persuade' Demeter to 'put aside her anger' and to 'relax her grief' so

that the earth can produce again and famine can be alleviated (Suter 2005, 109) – a clear parallel to the *Hymn*. Moreover, Demeter is involved in several theogamies identified as *hieros gamos* (Suter 2005, 109–10), and as Kendrick notes, Meredith's actions repeat her mother's early life: first, in her affair with her boss Derek (like Ellis' affair with Richard), and, subsequently, in becoming her mother's caretaker she repeats Ellis' treatment of Meredith 'avoidant, ambivalent, terrified of getting too close' (2007, 31). In fact, in cult worship of Demeter, Korê is literally Demeter's younger self (Suter 2005, 121), but by making Persephone Demeter's daughter, Korê also became Persephone's pre-goddess, younger self (Suter 2005, 121). In *Grey's Anatomy*, this twinning allegorizes similarities between feminist and post-feminist women as sharing dominion over similar territory – what it means to be a woman (especially within the surgical sphere) – yet one refuses to recognize the other as having anything to say about this shared territory. Psychoanalytically, this allegory positions Meredith in a pre-Symbolic space (the nameless Korê), before recognition of difference has taken place where, as Lacan observes, the subject's 'first object(ive) is to be recognized by the other' (E, 58). Alzheimer's compounds this lack of recognition, because it is now forever foreclosed.

Meredith's statement, 'I have a mother who doesn't recognize me' ('Grandmother Got Run Over by a Reindeer' 2.12) aptly expresses the impasses of *recognition* for many post-feminist heroines. And, as we have seen in previous chapters, this lack of recognition often stems from foreclosures in theory: of feminine *jouissance* in *Veronica Mars* or the 'feminist epistemological question' in *Ally McBeal*, where Ally is rejected as a 'good' feminist for posing this question. Yet the impasse established by Ellis' disease denotes a foreclosure to what is already repressed in Meredith's history, for we learn that Ellis' scrub nurse of 18 years 'practically lived with' Ellis but 'didn't meet that daughter *once*' ('No Man's Land' 1.4). The Persephone allegory is useful here, for when, between 650–550 BC the anonymous poet of the *Hymn* brings Persephone and Demeter together, so similar were their stories (and province of divinity), Suter argues, 'they could easily become assimilated to one another in worship' (2005, 133). Yet Persephone, Suter further notes, 'was too powerful to be completely absorbed and disappear' and instead the poet makes her into Demeter's daughter to 'accommodate' their areas of religious divinity into a single story that maintains the status of each (2005, 133). To put this into a feminist allegory, without recognition, the post-feminist position (and what it has to tell us about feminism) remains foreclosed and is absorbed into the feminist paradigm of 'false consciousness.' Equally,

when Dr. Wyatt tells Meredith she is 'a gifted, talented, extraordinary surgeon, exactly like [her] mother' ('Freedom (2)' 4.17), she hints that Meredith should not allow herself to be absorbed into her mother's foreclosure, but confront this foreclosure to learn from it.

As with the *Hymn*, and the post-feminist impasse, the real mother-daughter relation in *Grey's Anatomy* requires acknowledgement (confrontation) and analysis (accommodation) to be resolved. Meredith's inertia as Korê presents, as Peoples observes of long-term melancholics, 'a profound sense of deadness' that has the potential to irreversibly undermine the subject's 'capacity to create fluid *movement* between and through various psychic states' (2000, 248; original emphasis). But where Meredith's melancholia is a result of 'the mother thing' (and the 'father thing'), she has not simply lost the mother as object, but internalized the mother's regard – as Dr Wyatt puts it 'the problem is, you believed her' ('Losing My Mind' 4.15).

Downing argues that before Korê's abduction, she has 'no identity' and 'exists only as an extension of her mother' such that the 'connection to the mother is always also a connection to one's own mysterious origins' (1994, 144–5). Post-feminist women's recognition of their *feminist* origins is often assumed missing by their feminist predecessors in part, as I have argued here and earlier, because where feminist principles are incorporated into the infrastructure of the community (such as *Grey's* 'feminist friendly fantasy'), 'feminism' can no longer operate as an external critique. Consequently, despite Meredith being conscious of her origins in '*the* Ellis Grey' she has unconsciously internalized Ellis' feminist beliefs. Indeed, in following Ellis into a surgical career, Meredith 'demands' her mother's respect because 'surgical skill is the only currency that has any value with Ellis' (Kendrick 2007, 31), but is nonetheless denied the status of a subject who could return this regard *because* Ellis fails to recognize her. For Ellis, in her dementia, is re-living feminism, bringing feminist discourses to bear on Meredith's post-feminist existence and staging the deadlock in feminist attempts to identify and understand post-feminist sensibilities.

## 'Confrontation'

The analogy of Ellis as a 'raging' goddess Demeter and thus, feminist, follows readings of Demeter as a 'feminist mother' in much literature and evokes Henry's 'matraphor' (2004a), where the mother-daughter dynamic rhetorically frames feminist discourses engaged with feminisms of earlier or later generations. Ideally, the matraphor invokes

identification with the feminist figure, and the emulation of inherited qualities – biological and cultural – as positive attributes linking generations of women politically. As we saw with *Alias*, however, the intensity and strength of emotions – positive and negative, fears and fantasies – found in the mother-daughter relation, as well as the difficulty in isolating infantile memories from the adult woman's reality, is significant. The sense of indebtedness and duty put on young women to accept the cultural inheritance of feminist values, ideas, and beliefs can result – as *Grey's Anatomy* illustrates – in resentment, conflict, and misrecognition. For while in the *Hymn*, the mother-daughter relation is *consciously* used to 'accommodate' the tension between goddesses of similar function, the matraphor of feminist discourse is frequently invoked without acknowledging what underpins it: the scholar or critic's particular mother-daughter history, where 'feelings such as ambivalence and even outright hostility toward the mother have gone relatively unexplored' (Henry 2004a, 42). In psychoanalytic terms, this mother-daughter history – positive, negative, neutral, or ambivalent – forms the basis for the subject's future relations with women: the transference of structures that invoke the emotional dynamic of the original relationship. It is the *unconscious* mother-daughter transference of both feminist and post-feminist women plays a key role in the post-feminist impasse.

For some feminists, however, this is a strategic *effect* (if not goal) of post-feminist discourses: to separate women generationally and combat them against each other (see Douglas 2010, 11) – that is, to rupture the matraphor. In contrast, I argue, *Grey's Anatomy* confronts the matraphor, engaging with the history underpinning it to dissolve the emotional content and 'accommodate' a more considered relationship – in that what underpins the matraphor becomes *conscious* – between mother and daughter.

Ellis fits Rowe Karlyn's description of the type of woman associated with the feminist second wave: she is 'educated, white, came of age in the 1960s, and spent much of her life working hard to break through the glass ceiling. And she is a mother' (2011, 69). Somewhat contradictorily, Rowe Karlyn argues 'the mother daughter bond' 'remains invisible and unexplored' in post-feminist culture, yet where it *is* examined, she observes, it is represented negatively 'dispatch[ing] mothers with a vengeance, relegating them to sentimentality (*Stepmom*), hysteria (*American Beauty*), monstrosity (*Titanic*), or mere invisibility (*Rushmore*)' (2011, 8). In particular, *Grey's Anatomy*, Rowe Karlyn argues, depicts Ellis as a mother of 'utter passivity and incompetence' (2011, 13), albeit, via Alzheimer's. Once more, then, we have a repetition of feminist inquiry

that seeks ideal representations over those that might offer insight into the effect of Oedipal fixations – that is, the foreclosure of theories of sexuation. In displacing this aspect of the impasse onto Alzheimer's, however, *Grey's* does not demonize the feminist/mother so much as it provides a structure that 'makes visible' (Cowie 1997, 127) what feminism has foreclosed. Moreover, as Cowie argues of cultural fantasy structures authored by another, in Alzheimer's the 'origin of the material is disguised' such that the audience may 'overcome the internal censorship' (1997, 141) they might have toward a critique of feminism or indeed, their own Oedipal fixations.

Where Alzheimer's has the effect of Demeter's metaphoric 'veil' in the *Hymn* – of disguising Demeter as a mortal – it reminds Ellis (and Meredith), that though 'one of the greats,' Ellis cannot escape the Real of her mortality that (in the feminist allegory) she has foreclosed. In fact, as a Demeter figure, Ellis fits Arthur's reading of the *Hymn* (1999) through Freud's work on feminine development (discussed in Chapter 1), in that, like Demeter, Ellis has refused lack/castration in the Real, and identifies with the fantasy of the imaginary phallus – what Freud controversially calls 'penis envy' (SE7, 195; SE21, 229–30). In this analogy, Ellis denotes a key aspect of poststructuralist feminist discourses that foreclose the Real as that which is 'fixed, static, and analytically useless' to the aims of 'equality' (Wilson 2010, 200). Yet Meredith's simultaneous rejection and identification with her mother effectively repeats this aspect of her mother's story, for where symbolic castration has been foreclosed, it remains unconscious. As Freud notes, the 'striving to be masculine' during the phallic phase of female development undergoes repression and then transformation during adolescence, but it is remarkable 'how often we find that the wish for masculinity has been retained in the unconscious and, from out of its state of repression, exercises a disturbing influence' (SE23, 251). To return to Ragland's point here, that even where girls are raised in a 'politically correct' symbolic order where gender equality is taken for granted, it is the mother's 'unconscious desire regarding the phallus' that 'determines the "content" of the daughter's Ideal ego' (2004, 148), we might say that Meredith's Persephone complex shows us *where* 'unconscious desire regarding the phallus' *shapes* 'political correctness' – nay, feminism.

While the issue of symbolic castration remains unconscious in Meredith's identification with Ellis, her post-feminist experience as, historically, 'characterized by different problems and concerns' (Gill 2007, 249), *consciously* reprises a popular line of feminist inquiry into motherhood and professionalism, showing where this aspect of feminist

thought requires revision. In flashbacks to Ellis' surgical internship, the series explores the effect of having a child, which Ellis argues 'doesn't make me less of a surgeon. No matter how much everyone wants it to' ('The Time Warp' 6.15). Levine argues that Ellis' refusal to see her roles as mother and surgeon 'as incompatible' is a justified 'feminist responses to a discriminatory situation' (2013, 143), yet, as the series animates in other plotlines, within the demands of surgery sexual difference *is* relevant. Bailey's pregnant body presents the limit of this difference, as she cannot stop her pregnancy affecting her work ('Let It Be' 2.8 and 'Grandmother Got Run Over by a Reindeer' 2.12). For as the series later suggests, when a child is in distress a mother's 'heightened state of concern is a biological and evolutionary necessity' not easily ignored (see 'Got to Be Real' 11.3). Here *Grey's* exposes the foreclosure of Real sexual difference in Ellis' claim of discrimination, though in the new millennia, this difference is something to be overcome through medical innovation (surrogacy), and economics (full time childcare) – at least, for the affluent West.

As Ellis regresses mentally and exists in memories of her life as a young resident, she relives her relationship with Meredith as a child in the present. When admitted to Seattle Grace as a patient, Ellis spots Meredith and screams 'how many times I have I told you not to bother me at work?!' (see 'Make Me Lose Control' 2.3), and when Meredith visits Ellis at the nursing home, she is impatiently brushed aside, 'I don't have time to coddle you now, I'm trying to save lives here. Do you understand? *Do you*?' ('Staring at the Sun' 3.8). As a surgeon, Meredith *does* understand the demands of the job, reducing animosity in this confrontation to tragic irony. Kendrick notes, in fact, that the hospital setting juxtaposes mothering and professional careers to show where, within the surgical profession at least, 'motherhood is a distraction, and distractions make for sloppy surgeries' (2007, 30). In this sense, *Grey's Anatomy* is faithful to the realities of motherhood over an *ideal* representation, evident in multiple characters, such as the Korê figure run over by her nanny in the family SUV – a vehicle notorious for 'blind-spots' – such that Meredith observes 'people want high-powered careers, I get that, but they should think twice before having kids' ('Staring at the Sun' 3.8).

Quality of the *child's* life is central to the post-feminist revisionism of this equation: Izzie is a 'good mother' for adopting her baby out to better parents (see, 'Break on Through' 2.15), while Bailey is posited as a selfish mother for having a child when unable to properly mother (see 'Oh, the Guilt' 3.5 and 'Lay Your Hands on Me' 4.11). The quality of Meredith's childhood was clearly poor, and though it cannot be blamed

entirely on Ellis (Thatcher also abandons her), neither can it be entirely blamed on 'feminism.' During Ellis' one-day reprieve from Alzheimer's, however, the effects of feminist discourses on Ellis' perception of her post-feminist daughter manifest.

**The Persephone complex in the post-feminist impasse**

During Ellis' day of lucidity (see 'Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14), Meredith and Ellis reunite as adults, recalling Persephone's and Demeter's reunion in the *Hymn*, where Persephone returns to her mother an adult woman, no longer nameless girl but 'Persephone,' Queen of her own dominion and Demeter's equal. In the post-feminist allegory, Meredith and her mother come together over what is repressed in the impasse – conflicting attitudes towards the common province of what it means to be a woman.

When Ellis requests Meredith tell her what her life is like, 'I… really do want to know you,' Meredith reacts like 'thoughtful Persephone' telling Demeter of her adventure into the underworld with Hades (lines 406–33), hesitantly telling Ellis she has a boyfriend who, as a surgeon, understands the demands of Meredith's career. As with Demeter's scepticism, Ellis is enraged that Meredith has 'gone soft' and is 'stammering about a boyfriend' over career aspirations ('Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14). Here, Ellis articulates the feminist critique of post-feminist sensibilities as a 'return' 'to a pre-feminist world' (Modleski 1991), for just as Demeter asks '[b]y what guile did the mighty Host-to-Many deceive you?' (line 403), Ellis presumes Meredith has been beguiled by patriarchy in the Hades figure of Derek – that which feminist work sought to dismantle and which, in Ellis' rejection of husband and the function of the father, she had foreclosed. The feminist association of Hades with patriarchy here and in other examples (such as *Veronica Mars*) is somewhat suggestive of the Imaginary investment some feminist discourses have in the 'paternal metaphor' as a totalizing force of women's oppression. For, as Room observes, Hades derives from 'Aïdes' effectively translated as 'the unseen' or 'invisible' (1990, 145). In Ellis' feminist discourse (as with feminist readings of the *Hymn*), Hades comes to stand in for the 'unseen' coordinates and 'invisible' forces of patriarchal structures.

Ellis' critique goes further still, to the question of being a 'good' productive feminist (as discussed in the previous Chapter), for 'anyone' can fall in love, but not anyone can save lives. A common feminist criticism, Ellis invokes what Summers (2002) and Greer (1999) lament as the next generation's lack of feminist politics, a disappointment in the way that post-feminist women live their lives.[10] Here, the sense of indebtedness to pursue feminist goals assumes they have not been met

(the 'false consciousness' critique) and that these goals are themselves unimpeachable. In addition, the lament speaks of an inflated notion of woman as something *more* than the Real. As Ellis tells Meredith, 'I raised you to be an extraordinary human being, so imagine my disappointment when I wake up after five years and discover that you're no more than ordinary!' ('Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14). In this, Ellis denotes her investment in *imaginary* status, raising Meredith in effect, to have the phallus – if not in fact, *be* Ellis' Imaginary phallus; her disappointment comes in learning that Meredith is questioning this imaginary status and, via Derek, finding possible satisfaction in the Real of her sexual difference.

Ellis' refusal of castration here – 'women can also have the phallus' as Meredith's penis custody ironically suggests – expresses what is unconscious in the foreclosure or negation of post-feminist sensibilities that demonstrably *re*-embrace sexual difference. Feminist readings of the Persephone myth similarly illustrate where unresolved issues of castration in the matraphor inform attitudes towards Hades and Zeus as agents of patriarchy, such that we might also analyse the 'patraphor' invoked in the post-feminist impasse. For O'Reilly and Abbey, the Persephone myth 'foregrounds mother-daughter connections' essential to the development of specifically feminist subjects, where restitution of this connection can 'unite women' against 'the "dragon to be slain:"' patriarchy (2000, 2–3). Ellis' retro-feminist discourse articulates this reading of the Persephone myth, first, by identifying the 'problem' with Meredith as a failure to live according to feminist goals (Meredith 'blabbers about a boyfriend' instead of her career) and, second, by invoking feminism's opposite – patriarchy – as 'the "dragon to be slain"' (Derek).

Ellis' lucidity during the confrontation suggests she is locked in an old model of feminist rage that *misrecognizes* the current situation. When Ellis tells Derek that *he* is 'what happened to Meredith' and 'no wonder she's so unfocussed,' Derek attempts to justify his relationship with Meredith, but Ellis interrupts with another misrecognition from the past, 'I've met men like you before: threatened by a woman who's their equal' ('Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14). As Gill observes, second wave feminist 'antipathy' for heterosexual romance assumed women to be 'passive' dupes of a structure that sustained an ideological oppression of women (2007, 220; see, also, Modleski 1982a; Radway 1984) – themes re-invoked in current debates about childcare (Badinter 2006, 3). Ellis' attack on Derek invokes this Marxist feminist critique and, as with feminist readings of the *Hymn*, marks man as the patriarchal oppressor of woman – as metaphoric abductor and rapist. As an allegory for the

post-feminist impasse, Ellis' attack on Derek articulates a sense of resentment toward men often identified in institutionalized feminist discourses (see Tapper 1993) warranting further investigation. And where Ellis' attack is informed by Meredith's father, Thatcher, Ellis denotes the foreclosure of the 'function of the father' in feminist discourses. Mistaking George for Thatcher, Ellis accuses him of being 'weak' and 'pathetic,' using a point of feminist equality to illustrate that, as 'the breadwinner' in their relationship, she has no use for a man: 'Meredith might think she needs you but I sure as hell don't!' ('Make Me Lose Control' 2.3). Ellis' logic articulates the belief that 'once a woman can support herself and her children, she can leave a man she can no longer stand' so that, 'after a millennia of a more or less gentle tyranny [...] woman was finally to become the heroine' of her own destiny (Badinter 2006, 1–2). In an era when marriage was the dominant career option for many women, and when leaving an abusive or unsatisfying marriage was difficult due to a lack of resources (education, work, money), this was a significant breakthrough. Ellis' satisfaction in being able to support herself and her daughter, however, does not have any reasonable connection to hating Derek, whom she does not know; and where, it transpires, she adopts out her child with Richard without his knowledge ('Got to Be Real' 11.3), we see her total rejection of the paternal function. Here, as Daughters argues of Demeter (1994, 258), Ellis acts like a neurotic 'man-hater' keeping Korê (ready to mature towards symbolic identity), infantilized and, in the feminist allegory, denotes the ideological stasis of feminist episteme.

Where Ellis' rigid feminist ideology is exposed, feminist tropes such as 'equality' are subject to post-feminist 'revisionism' in the series, invoking the work/life equation to measure the *value* of life, rather than the level of equality achieved. While attending Ellis in the hospital, Christina asks her, 'can I have both?' that is, 'be a great surgeon, and have a life?' ('Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14). Ellis' answer is ambivalent; she suggests that, in retrospect, she should have 'tried harder' to make things work, and Meredith's experience as the daughter of this type of feminism testifies to this. Confronting Ellis, Meredith explains that what 'happened' to her was not becoming the dupe of a patriarchal romance but, rather, Ellis: 'You want to know what happened to me? YOU. *You* happened to me' ('Wishin' and Hopin'' 3.14). When Ellis slips back into her dementia and is shut off to Meredith, Meredith's apathy – 'what's the point?' – leads to her drowning, denoting the impossibility of staying in this impasse of misrecognition where no dialogue is possible: it is literally a deathly space for the post-feminist heroine.

## 'Accommodation'

Demeter's refusal to let the crops grow brings the world to a halt because no offerings can be made to the gods (lines 305–13) and the impasse between Ellis and Meredith is equally paralysing; moreover, because of Ellis' Alzheimer's, '[i]ts too late for Meredith to forge a real relationship with her mother – all she can do now is assume the role of caretaker and try to move forward into adulthood' (Kendrick 2007, 30). And though, as Christina puts it, 'being aware of your crap, and actually overcoming your crap, are two very different things' ('Kung Fu Fighting' 4.6), *Grey's Anatomy* nevertheless provides a 'real world' solution to Meredith's psychic impasse as Korê/Persephone that allegorically addresses the impasse in feminist debates over 'the woman.' Meredith begins psychotherapy: she confronts forgotten history, uncovers, deciphers, and symbolizes her symptoms. In this, Meredith demonstrates how the foreclosure of material informing the 'matraphor' needs to be likewise recovered, worked through, and symbolized to address some of the impasses in feminist thought. This is, I argue, the function of the Persephone myth in post-feminist heroine television too: the 'confrontation and accommodation' (Suter 2005) of what has been foreclosed.

Subsequently, where Meredith confronts her psychic inertia as Korê, other aspects of her Persephone story become more freely articulated. As with *Alias*, *Grey's Anatomy* illustrates the importance in the 'the father thing' in Meredith's development, but Thatcher is absent from her story; instead, she must come to symbolize the function of the *Symbolic* father in her story: Richard. Though feminist literature on Persephone views Zeus as an interloper in the mother-daughter drama, his role in regulating their relation actually allows them to interact without either losing their identity or significance as a goddess. For despite Rich's claim (1986, 237) that separation of mother and daughter is the 'essential female tragedy' equal to Hamlet and Oedipus, the Persephone myth is not a tragedy. At the *Hymn's* close, all have been given a satisfying solution: Persephone is given dominion over the underworld and may return annually to her mother; Hades is given a companion of distinction to live with him in the underworld; and Demeter not only gets to be with her daughter for the most part of each year (more than Hades), she is given honours at Eleusis – the most significant religious ceremony in the ancient world – as compensation. Indeed, Demeter's honours or *timais* at Eleusis do not include Persephone and, as Suter argues (2005, 129), reassert Demeter's continued value as a goddess now that her daughter is of equal status. And where Meredith's real father, Thatcher,

fails to regulate the mother-daughter relation, the Zeus figure in her story – Richard – comes to acknowledge he should have done so when Meredith was a young Korê figure ('No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5.21).[11]

Meredith's solution is not, like Ally, to immerse herself in the fantasy of her symptoms but rather, much like the heroines of *Drop Dead Diva* and *Samantha Who?*, to use death to produce a rebirth, allowing the heroine to radically break with the feminist ideological foreclosures that inform her existence. The allegory of Meredith's Persephone complex with the post-feminist impasse (as with all heroines analysed here) suggests the deadened state of debates about women in culture equally need a radical shift to transform. The Persephone myth is suggestive of this transformative possibility, for as Calasso notes, Persephone's descent into the underworld changes the structure of the mythic world, which 'had lost [its] primordial fluidity, [and] had hardened into a profile' because, with Persephone's existence in the underworld 'death acquires a body' (1994, 211–12). *Grey's Anatomy* stages this transformation where, just as Persephone introduces a body into the space where there was none, *Grey's* places the sexed and reproductive body into a space where there formerly was none – the surgical career – where, significantly, Meredith's post-feminist Persephone story brings the female body back into a popular cultural agenda, rupturing the 'hardened profile' of deadlocked feminist debates.

Even more importantly, *Grey's* openly confronts the mother-daughter transference that has remained unconscious in feminist debates. And though Meredith arrived at the repressed trauma of Ellis' attempted suicide during Meredith's childhood, her breakthrough comes when she realizes her mother was a 'gifted, talented, extraordinary surgeon' who, if she had wanted to kill herself, would have done so (see 'Freedom (2)' 4.17). Dr. Wyatt affirms the underlying revelation is, as with post-feminism itself, that 'you get to learn from her mistakes.' In this, Meredith's post-feminist rejection of feminism does not discard feminist *gains* but, rather, discards the uncritical use *of* feminism to make sense of the current situation: a world that has not only absorbed feminist ideas but also revised many of them. For, as I have shown in previous chapters, feminism is no longer productive as an external critique of this world. As Ellis metaphorically illustrates through her Alzheimer's, feminism no longer recognizes Meredith's particular 'problems and concerns' and, in fact, now *distorts* them. Meredith's decision to move forward thus provides an allegory for addressing the impasse of post-feminism. In confronting the impasse with her mother, Meredith 'accommodates'

this history into her life narrative – Derek even suggests that she can now provide a positive model for others in her ability to transform 'because you've seen worse, [and] you've survived worse' ('Elevator Love Letter' 5.19).

Though Meredith and her mother meet in the underworld, and a brief reconciliation takes place ('Some Kind of Miracle' 3.17), Meredith continues to work through the psychic impasse in psychotherapy well after this episode. And though the Persephone plot functions here to recover the broken-down relations between mother and daughter, it is not, as in *Alias*, to aid a fantasy of 'reclaiming the goddess'; rather, it attempts to navigate the triangular Oedipal relationships where they inform the heroine's adult relationships.

**Reluctant Persephone, consort to Hades**

More than other post-feminist Persephone plots, *Grey's Anatomy* addresses the function of Hades in Persephone's *hieros gamos* – 'sexual union of a divine female principle with a divine male principle' (Suter 2005, 102). In many post-feminist retellings of the myth, Hades figures are introduced as sinister and malevolent abductors (*Alias*) or rapists (*Veronica Mars*), and symbols of patriarchy.[12] Meredith's Hades, Derek, is somewhat unique in that their union is given a mythic status in the hospital, described as 'the legend of Meredith and Derek' (see 'Freedom (1)' 4.16), yet some aspects of the *Hymn* remain, for though Derek by no means rapes Meredith, he seeks to love her against her will. Derek's last name 'Shepherd' hints at a Hades not recognized in feminist frameworks, as he both guides and protects Meredith and 'shepherds' her into accepting their union, even approaching the Chief to mediate their marriage, reinstating the symbolic father Zeus that Richard stands for in Meredith's life (see 'Beat Your Heart Out' 5.13 and 'Elevator Love Letter' 5.19). Yet Meredith remains, like Persephone in the *Hymn*, 'reluctant' (line 343). Her response to childhood abandonment was to reject love, such that, as Derek notes, while 'she wants [love], she doesn't know how to have it' ('A Change Is Gonna Come' 4.1).

Meredith's reluctance to accept Derek offers a useful insight into her Persephone complex where it informs the post-feminist impasse. For, unlike Persephone, 'reluctant through desire for her mother' (lines 343–4), Meredith is *conflicted* by conscious and unconscious thoughts about the mother – her unconscious desire for the real mother and conscious rejection of the feminist matraphor. Meredith sees Derek and his desire for commitment, love, and family as a type of underworld that would lead to a death of her (feminist) independence and

worth – a figure incarnating Carlson's 'patriarchal shadow of Hades' (1997, 16). She frets if she marries Derek she will become known only as 'Dr. Mrs. Shepherd,' have 'five chatty children,' and live in the wilderness until she becomes 'dead inside' and begin an affair (see 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' 5.1).[13] Significantly, however, Meredith has already been in this desperate underworld: metaphorically 'dead inside' she *begins* the series by having an affair with (albeit unbeknownst to her) with a married man (Derek). The twinning of her mother in this regard hints at the feminist influence on Meredith's post-feminist story where Derek-as-Hades signifies patriarchal oppression under which Meredith would lose her identity and become 'someone's wife' (Dr. Mrs. Shepherd). Consciously, however, Meredith does not want to identify with her feminist mother and, it is Derek who, as the paternal substitute, rescues her from this conflict where neither her real nor her symbolic father can. Meredith's ability to move forward in her story is therefore also dependant on her re-examination of Hades beyond her mother's feminist view.

Though the 'marriage' between Hades and Persephone is overlooked in feminist scholarship where Hades symbolizes patriarchy, Hades' suitability as husband is unsurpassed and, as several commentators note, Persephone is pleased with the union (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 47–9; Suter 2005). Moreover, as Suter argues, Persephone does not actually *marry* Hades – the language of the *Hymn* only describes her as becoming his 'bedmate' (2005, 76) and 'consort' (93–5), and this distinction is significant. Marriage functioned in the ancient Greek world to perpetuate the community by initiating young women (and men) into its customs, but in the *Hymn*, Persephone's new community of initiation is the underworld, as *Veronica Mars* articulates. In addition, she does not live there permanently but returns to her 'premarital family and associates, traveling to and from while her husband stays at home' (Suter 2005, 94–5). Meredith and Derek's civil ceremony ('White Wedding' 7.20), suggests Meredith is not initiated into the status-quo – into the post-feminist *impasse* – but, however reluctant, forges a new beginning with her Hades, 'revising' her feminist rejection of heterosexual marriage as a potential 'loss-of-self.' Nevertheless, Meredith's refusal to let her career come second to a man's impacts this marriage in later episodes, suggesting her internalization of feminist ideas, emphasized by Christina's insistence that, as a woman, she is the 'sun' to Derek's eclipsing shadow ('Fear (of the Unknown)' 10.24), has not been addressed. For what remains unconscious in her Persephone complex is identification with the mother's feminism.

Where Nochimson argues the Persephone myth metaphorically structures the cyclical nature of soap opera (1992), she suggests this structure must remain ambivalently *un*resolved in order to perpetuate the series. *Grey's Anatomy* is (to date) in its eleventh season; however, I argue its open-ended structure does not prevent Meredith from attempting to resolve her symptoms, for, like the work of analysis, such resolution is not the work of a moment later forgotten, but continues to inform the analysand's life. Indeed, the open-ended structure of *Grey's*, as a soap opera, gives a more honest account of the work of analysis and its limitations, revealing, via new encounters in the analysand's life, where the work is incomplete. Ideally, the work of analysis is to make conscious desire such that one can 'act with more mindfulness' in light of it (Themi 2014, 126), and as the series continues, and Meredith becomes a mother, she questions her ability to be a good one given 'my mother was about as nurturing as a steak knife' but realizes that one must 'adapt or die' ('I Will Survive' 7.21). Yet at this point Meredith does not 'act with more mindfulness,' and where viewers return to the narrative (and the network continues to renew the formula), suggests that Meredith's analysis is incomplete: that neither she (nor the viewer) has reached the 'bedrock' or metaphoric 'truths' of her complex.

As Freud's argues of the melancholic, Meredith has not confronted *what she has lost* in her mother, what her mother has foreclosed: not just the paternal function but, more significantly, the symbolic castration the paternal metaphor institutes. As such, Meredith repeats her mother's flaws as what is still unconscious (castration) 'is blocked by resistance' (Brooks 1985, 98), symbolically hinted at in Meredith's nickname in later episodes as 'Medusa' ('Going, Going, Gone' 9.1). Freud notes that the spectacle of snakes protruding from Medusa's head (in mythology), denote the fear of castration, for 'however frightening they may be in themselves' the phallic imagery of the snakes 'mitigate' against the 'horror' of castration – replacing what is not there: the penis (SE18, 273). The extent to which allegorical themes of Persephone narrate the post-feminist impasse is undoubtedly, for most, at the level of the unconscious, and as Meredith regresses in later episodes to her mother's feminist stance towards Derek, we can see that, where her mother's feminism is unconscious in Meredith's story, it prevents her analysis from being fully resolved. Freud notes that the 'psychical apparatus is intolerant of unpleasure; it has to fend it off at all costs and, and if the perception of reality involves unpleasure, that perception – that is, the truth – must be sacrificed' (SE23, 237), and in this, *Grey's*

shows us where feminism's unconscious place in post-feminist cultures produces an internal conflict. For the issue of castration for Meredith is not simply whether she can occupy the (passive) feminine position (accepting castration) – and many might argue that, in her post-feminist sensibilities, Meredith embraces the feminine position – but, in addition, whether she can allow Hades to have the phallus. In both Ellis' and Meredith's history, this 'truth' remains repressed where, as Freud puts it, 'resistance prevents any change from taking place' and 'everything stays as it was' (SE23, 252).

## 'Change her story!'

In its post-feminist 'revisionism' *Grey's Anatomy*, as with many post-feminist narratives, asks of its heroine: what will constitute my being in the world (if not feminist concerns)? By what measure will this existence be successful or valuable? Rayworth suggests that, despite romantic intrigues and medical plotlines, the series is at base 'a meditation on life and death' (2007, 111), and in confronting Meredith's impasse and accommodating her feminist mother, I suggest *Grey's* turns to question what of life should be *affirmed*, of what determines a 'good' life. The series frequently presents Meredith with ethical questions about the type of heroine she will be and how she will act towards others: what is Meredith willing to cross a line for? Break the law for? This poses a question of ethics not, as with the feminist model, produced in relation to an inflated moral 'Good' but, rather, as a response to the drives and how they will be sublimated and affirmed in culture (see Themi 2014). For while the practice of medicine is bound to a legal system of ethics, like *Ally McBeal*, *Grey's Anatomy* puts this law to the test – often over the ethics of organ donation and questions of fertility – but more frequently, for Meredith, over the fate of young Korê figures who repeat Meredith's story.

Meredith's actions towards six-year-old Maddie (Destiny Grace Whitlock), who shot her father 17 times, denotes the significance of breaking the impasse. Though Maddie's mother insists it was an accident, it becomes evident the child's and mother's own injuries are the result of constant abuse. Meredith breaks the law surrounding victims of abuse in the hospital to confront Maddie's mother, insisting that Maddie should not apologize to her father but rather: '*You* should be apologizing to *her*' ('No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5:21). As a victim of abuse, the mother is entitled to refuge without judgment in the hospital, and Meredith is put on probation for her insubordination.

Meredith breaks this probation to confront the woman again, because 'this cannot be your daughter's story: that she shot her dad seventeen times to protect her mother, and you went back to him.' Meredith is adamant that 'somebody had to stand up for that little girl. I make no apology for that' ('No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5.21), and her final emphatic statement points to the significance of this dilemma where it reflects Meredith's own childhood: 'You have to change her story while you still have a chance. For both of you – but for *her* – for your little girl. *You have to change her story*' ('No Good at Saying Sorry (One More Chance)' 5.21). This narrative clearly marks Meredith's attempt to change her own story and, indeed, shows the need for the post-feminist impasse to change also.

As I have argued here, the evocation of the Persephone myth in *Grey's Anatomy* serves a dual function, both aspects of which provide an allegory for the post-feminist impasse. It stages the political dynamic of the impasse between feminist (Ellis) and post-feminist women (Meredith) within the context of the mother-daughter rivalry between the two goddesses brought together in the *Hymn*. In effect the myth functions in the series to address the 'matraphor' by showing how it is produced on the mother-daughter relationship that underpins what Freud calls the subject's 'pre-history' (SE22, 112–35). As such, *Grey's Anatomy* exposes the tenuous ability of the familial metaphor to inform feminist politics and theory where such pre-history remains unrecognized.

Despite the argument that mother-daughter relations are 'invisible and unexplored' in popular culture (Rowe Karlyn 2011, 8) as I have shown throughout this book, many post-feminist television narratives are informed by, or structured around, the Persephone myth, a quintessential mother-daughter drama. What Rowe Karlyn illustrates in her claim, then, is the way in which feminist work on the mother-daughter bond – like feminist work on the Persephone myth – seeks a *fantasy* of a 'healthy' mother-daughter relationship that 'remains unexplored' – as if, like the goddess, it were capable of being recovered to reveal its pre-patriarchal 'truth.' The truth, as Meredith herself informs us, 'hurts, so … we lie' ('Tell Me Sweet Little Lies' 2.14); the foreclosure of theories regarding the mother-daughter relation (Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis) in favour of feminist revisions (such as Rich 1986) follows this lie, and, I suggest, unsatisfactory representations of the mother-daughter relation are attributed to 'patriarchy' so as not to confront it. As Freud notes, where perception of the world produces 'unpleasure,' 'truth' is often sacrificed in the ego's efforts to mitigate unpleasure, such that 'the

defensive mechanisms of the ego are condemned to falsify one's internal perception and to give one only a distorted and imperfect picture of one's id' (SE23, 237). This disavowal is a point I take up in the concluding chapter, where I return to the original question of this book: what is the significance of the Persephone myth to post-feminist cultures?

# Conclusion: The Persephone Complex

What is the value of the Persephone myth in post-feminist television for women? Persephone's resonance in the feminist imaginary provides a strong clue to her function in stories about women, but the particular circumstances of the new context – post-feminist heroine television – presents a unique situation, where questions about feminine sexuation are animated in a space presumed to be 'beyond' such ideas. Where heroine television has historically distilled 'the agenda that feminism has made public' (Brunsdon 1997, 34), it is now triangulated with critical, popular, and political discourses, such that heroine television begins to 'make public' what these discourses think *about* feminism. A traditional feminist critique that looks for feminist ideas – 'the current state of feminist thinking' or the cumulative effect of developments 'in feminist's conceptual and theoretical agenda' (Brooks 1997, 4–7) – in the text finds it absent and in its place, a 'resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference' (Gill 2007, 255). Feminist scholars develop a range of hypotheses regarding why, but few engage with post-feminist revisionism as a *legitimate* critique of feminism and, consequently, assume where feminism is absent its opposite must be present – patriarchy. This is the post-feminist impasse.

Feminist discourses shape existing scholarship on women in television *and* literature on Persephone such that it is difficult to overcome the assumption that elements of feminist theory shape the representation of Persephone in heroine television. Yet no consistency of feminist thought is evident; rather, the discourses of post-feminism are conflicted over feminist episteme, and these conflicts now manifest *textually* in heroine television – in the structure and themes of the Persephone myth.

As I have argued here, the Persephone myth is the manifest expression of debates at the centre of the post-feminist impasse; indeed, it

is a narrative *symptom* of this impasse, and I contend it is invoked in post-feminism, as Suter argues it was in the *Hymn*, as a means of negotiating dominant cultural beliefs at a specific historical moment. In relation to the feminist epistemological problem, the myth tells the story of female triangular conflicts and desires or, more accurately, it presents a series of *questions* regarding the essentialist or constructed qualities of these desires (as in *Ally McBeal*). As such, it dramatizes debates between feminism and psychoanalysis over feminine identity into which Persephone is drawn (as in *Alias*). Further, it illustrates the deadlock in the epistemologies of feminist methods, where the projection of feminism onto the post-feminist heroine distorts our understanding of her story – echoing feminist readings of the Persephone myth (as in *Veronica Mars*). Ultimately, it produces a means of articulating the conscious and unconscious thoughts on 'woman' between feminist and post-feminist women (as in *Grey's Anatomy*) – that is, it shows where Oedipal conflicts shape political, ideological, and historical relations between women for it is ultimately the case that the *Hymn* tells Persephone's *and* Demeter's story.

After analysing the articulations of Persephone in post-feminist television for women, then, it is also evident that the Persephone myth is not a story *about* feminism but, rather, about the girl and the woman. As the story of the mother-daughter drama, it appears so frequently in heroine television for the simple reason that every heroine has a mother, regardless of the biological circumstances of her conception, gestation, and birth, or the cultural mapping of her upbringing. Indeed, the animation of the Persephone myth in post-feminism points *precisely* to the question of the effects of this politico-cultural and historical mapping on this drama – that is, the effects of *feminism* on this drama – as the most common revision in the post-feminist context is that the mother has abandoned her daughter (or was never known by her, such as *Dark Angel*) and – for a variety of narrative rationales – the daughter is compelled to find her, propelling the heroine into a space where Oedipal fantasies (and fears) about the mother (and feminism) are animated.

Indeed, though no bisexual, queer, or transgender Persephones were analysed in the book, their stories fit within the parameters of Persephone's function – psychoanalytically, and in post-feminist television. Heroine's were chosen based on their popularity and location in different television genres, but could easily have included the Persephone plots dramatized in *The L Word*, where each heroine must, like every subject, negotiate a relation to the mother. The object choice of the father-substitute or Hades figure is, for many women, female just

as it is quite possible that the 'third term' figure who beaks the mother-daughter bond could also be female. Regardless of the gender and sex of figures occupying these central coordinates in the child's Oedipal triangle, the structure of psychic development that requires separation from the first Other remains.[1]

In contrast to the Homeric *Hymn*, which dramatizes Demeter's grief 'as she reacts and eventually comes to terms with the abduction and rape of her daughter' (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 13), each post-feminist example stages the *daughter's* grief – confusion, anger, or melancholy, depending on the extent this grief can be articulated – over her mother's abandonment and its effects on the daughter's life. For, as Ragland affirms, it matters not what the 'politically correct language of the child's symbolic order' tells her she can 'become'; rather, it is the 'mother's unconscious desire regarding the phallus – the difference qua difference – that determines' the "content" of the daughter's Ideal ego' (2004, 148). Where the post-feminist heroine remains caught in an unresolved Persephone complex, then, I argue, the fantasy of recovering the mother so predominant in this plot aims to resolve Oedipal conflicts – especially those (unresolved) conflicts of the feminist/mother's *theory*: the problem of the Real body in feminine sexuation and the consequent limitations on feminine *jouissance* in the Real.

In this, the Persephone symptom functions as a fantasy – for feminists, feminist psychoanalysts, post-feminist television heroines (and their audiences) alike – in the sense that, it provides a *structural scene* in which something foreclosed is 'made visible' and thus, made *possible*. For as we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, even Kulish and Holtzman's work uses the myth to subvert conceptual impasses feminists have with Freudo-Lacanian theory. The myth is thus a fantasy overcoming something deemed impossible: in post-feminism, the 'feminist epistemological problem' of the woman's body and feminine sexuality. That is, the myth substitutes for fundamental 'bedrock' concepts of psychoanalytic theory involved in processes of sexuation.

The myth nevertheless dramatizes the function of Symbolic and Imaginary castration so resisted in feminist discourses. Korê cannot stay with her mother: both she *and* Demeter must recognize the signifier of difference (Zeus, Hades) that dissolves the exclusivity of their symbiosis. That is, they must both accept symbolic castration, for without recognition of difference, they remain caught in the *Imaginary* mother-daughter drama. In this, the Persephone myth offers a more flexible template of the mother-daughter drama than Hendrika Freud's promotion of the Electra myth (2010), for the absence of a unifying version of

Persephone's story allows the myth to narrate a fuller range of complexities within – its successes too.

On a basic level, then, the Persephone myth traverses 'the rub' – the mother-child relationship – which, Freud argues, is rarely if ever 'adequately surmounted in the course of development' (SE22, 134). The story ends with a pleasing compromise for Persephone and Demeter, a resolution with strict boundaries to mediate mother and daughter interaction. This is not an image of a (necessarily) perfect mother-daughter (or mother-child) relationship, but rather, a *practical* one that 'accommodates' the desires of each – a compromise – in that Zeus' intervention frees Persephone and Demeter from their difficulty in establishing the right amount of intimacy: too much and Persephone would cease to exist as a subject in her own right (a fear prevalent in *Alias*) too little and a complex develops over Korê's abandonment (as played out in *Ally McBeal* and *Grey's Anatomy*).

The Persephone myth in post-feminism, however, is evidence of a complex: in Freud's terms, it is a collection 'of strongly emotional thoughts and interests' that are partially unconscious and in conflict with consciously held beliefs (SE15, 109). It plays out the repressed discourses around feminine identity processes as they conflict with consciously held, poststructuralist ideas about the construction of feminine identity via the performative and discursive practices of the neoliberal subject. That this drama takes on traumatic qualities – especially where it encounters the Real – it follows the function of myth in dramatizing the cost of *relinquishing* the Real (and the continued effects of the Real) in the Symbolic order of cultural meaning exchange. In this, the Persephone myth responds to an unconscious problem that lingers in feminist discourses as a trauma: the feminist epistemological problem of the Real of sexual difference and sexuation.

Where the Persephone myth in heroine television encourages transference between producers, audiences, and the text created and experienced between them, it replicates the work of analysis in the psychoanalytic clinic. Here the Persephone symptom stages what Wright poses as the '*collective fantasies*' of culture, 'and their historical determinants' (1998, 3; my emphasis). Wright's reminder that analysis 'relies on the patient's living response' (1998, 192) is particularly pertinent to television, where audiences are fragmented and may not always be conscious of their analysis of the heroine's symptoms. For as Brooks notes, making sense of melodrama's excesses and mapping 'its particular coördinates' is achieved by the 'critical gesture' of the reader (1995, xvii), and other interpretations of the Persephone myth's meaning no doubt exist here.

Each text drew out one or more particular aspects of the myth as it relates to the impasse, according to the age and situation of the heroine, the genre framing her story and, in particular, the heroine's place in the *timeline* of post-feminism. Each of these determinants, likewise, reflects something of the audience for each text. What ties all variations together is the way the myth is used to narrate the specific cultural, social, and political *mise en scène* informing the heroine's (and potentially the audience's) rite of passage as a woman: post-feminism.

The heroines whose stories are analysed here represent a particular chronology of this moment that required fantastic scenarios to express what was foreclosed, and it is an era, I suggest, that has passed or, at least, is no longer as richly fantastic. Much network programming today follows *Grey's Anatomy* in making feminism a common-sense or taken-for-granted aspect of the narrative universe, such as *New Girl* (2011c) and often given comedic treatment in programmes like *30 Rock* (2006–13). Yet where *Girls* (2012c) – notably *not* network programming – animates these conflicts as a dark comedy, it does so through a particular feminist episteme that maintains the conflicts of the impasse such that they return in symptom form as neurosis. Social media and digital platforms such as weblogging, vlogging, and tumblr have more recently proved fertile ground for the impasse between feminist and post-feminist women. Yet here, there is no gatekeeper, such that 'the personal' of feminist discourses are now broadcast in greater volumes (if questionable reality testing) and are reaching significant political mass. But where women articulate dissatisfaction with this resurgence of feminism, in the '#womenagainstfeminism' tumblr, for example, they are virulently rejected, showing the continued foreclosure of feminist engagement with post-feminist discourses as legitimate forms of critique or revision. Moreover, feminist responses to post-feminist discourses in this space continue to follow those identified in this book, in themes of 'false consciousness,' anxiety over the epistemology of the woman's body in public spaces, and the negation of young women's ownership of pleasure and desire.

Adopting a psychoanalytic approach to the post-feminist impasse builds on current understandings of the connection between the audience and text. As *Ally's* narrative illustrated, the Persephone symptom is not simply the expression of what cannot be admitted to consciousness but, as Žižek puts it, the symptom is 'a way for the subject to organize his or her enjoyment' (1992, 424). The repeated return to and working through of the Persephone symptom in post-feminist media culture, therefore, presents a process of enjoyment, yet this enjoyment does not

necessarily lead to overcoming it, especially in the context of television narrative, where the producers and consumers of this symptom have arguably only partial consciousness of it. Bollas reminds us that 'the analyst and the analysand' 'work together to develop new psychic structures which the patient can then use to radically alter his or her life' (1992, 6). Thus, as we shed light on the original questions of this book, new ones emerge. In particular, to what extent does television – in animating cultural symptoms – facilitate therapeutic effects, or is the transference between audience and creators over the narrative symptom too opaque to do anything other than cultivate enjoyment in the unconscious structure of the symptom?

Applying psychoanalytic thought to common themes in feminist discourses that repeat, like a symptom, in debates over post-feminism offer a new way of looking at these symptoms and require, I suggest, further investigation. Indeed, this book has identified several areas in need of analysis and revision: the function of fantasy in feminist theory and in women's television programming; the methodological practices and theories informing feminist cultural criticism; the potential of psychoanalytic criticism to enhance the field of television studies and feminist criticism where they address notions of pleasure and desire.

The work of this book has provided key insights on the state of feminism at a significant historical moment, but it also poses a critical question: if the themes of the Persephone myth point us to the symptoms of post-feminism – what it means to be a woman in a specific historical, political, and cultural context – where such questions are now foreclosed in feminist thought, is feminism the most useful tool to respond to the questions of these impasses? Or is the symptomatic return of Persephone themes evidence feminist thought is no longer best positioned to answer these questions?

Where feminism, under the influence of poststructuralist theory, has foreclosed psychoanalysis – and the Real of the drives that are the subject of psychoanalytic work – one is reminded of Lacan's observation that, where the Christians 'erased the whole sphere of the gods' (SVII, 260) they became 'administrators of the access to desire' (SVII, 262). The melodramatic mode of storytelling in which the Persephone symptom arises is, as Brooks notes, is a mode of storytelling particularly pertinent to the 'post-sacred era,' for the

> hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, legible, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even

> though we cannot derive from them any transcendental system of belief. (1994, viii)

In this, Persephone's story may do more than simply narrate an impasse in 'ways of being' woman; for the myth animates a symptom not simply of post-feminism, but as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, of the Judeo Christian values that have informed feminism and occluded the Real of the drives that feminism now forecloses. Though many Western States perceive themselves to be predominately secular, the Persephone complex shows us where the West struggles to 'locate and make evident' a mode of being that incorporates the Real of the drives.[2] As Brooks notes, melodramatic modes articulate 'desire at an impasse' – that is, at the 'intersection of primal ethical forces' (1994, xii–xiii). The Persephone myth, without doubt, touches on themes difficult to integrate into modern values, where abduction and rape are fundamentally contra to notions of the sovereign subject, civil rights, and of course, feminism. Consequently, where feminism has foreclosed the Real of the drives that psychoanalysis takes as its subject, its notion of being remains partial.

As Themi notes, the ethical work of psychoanalysis – to make conscious desire such that one can 'act with more mindfulness' in light of it (2014, 126) – is, for many, too painful. As we saw in Chapter 6, 'if the perception of reality involves unpleasure, that perception – that is, the truth – must be sacrificed' (Freud SE23, 237). As such, Themi puts it 'the perpetual resistances towards the claims of psychoanalysis, and the tenacity of subsequent scholars to refute them nigh by any means at the intellect's disposal' (2014, 19) suggests that what Persephone's story animates in post-feminism is that which is 'too painful' for the ego of an imagined sovereign subject to confront or incorporate into their reality. Themi ads this is why many cannot 'relinquish the opiates of religion' (2014, 19), yet in a secular West that has ostensibly relinquished public ideals motivated by religion, the claims of mainstream feminist discourses of 'equality' – what Lacan might call the 'language of practical reason' (SVII, 259) have come, as McRobbie argues (2009), to organize the ideal 'good' that social, political, and institutional policy aims at—'in theory, if not in fact.'

Why, then, Persephone? A myth far from the imaginary aims of this moral 'Good' and, moreover, one that troubles it deeply. Where the sovereign subject is *ideally* imagined, one confronts the symptoms of what has been foreclosed – the Real – *without* knowledge. Themi notes that when 'the reality principle is coopted by pleasure in the imaginary'

'what is defined as "reality" is not our best approximation to the truth but a means to cover over it' (2014, 19). From here, Lacan puts it, the 'good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy' (SVII, 259). Thus, we might say that in the context of the post-feminist impasse, Persephone's story dramatizes the symptoms of feminism's tragic *excess* – of foreclosing the Real – and denotes the *complex* of ideas regarding sexuation that are conflicted where they are subject to the repressive effects of a feminist-informed society.

# Notes

## Introduction: Why Persephone?

1. Given its association with the 'French feminisms' of continental philosophy that reject identification with Western or Anglophone feminism (Moses 1998), significant contestation over the term develops in the Anglophone world in the early 1980s (Russo 1983), as I detail further in Chapter 2.
2. See Brunsdon (2005), McRobbie (2008), Tasker and Negra (2005), in Chapter 2.

## 1 The Myth of Persephone and the *Hymn to Demeter*

1. Calasso's version (1994, chapter 7) is more comprehensive as it synthesizes all sources into a new poetic version in the Homeric style, but is less well known.
2. Henceforth all quotes from the myth refer to the original lines reprinted and translated by Foley (1999), unless otherwise stated.
3. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book 5, lines 397–8) she calls for her mother.
4. In other versions, Iambe exposes her genitals to Demeter (Agha-Jaffar 2002, 84).
5. Freud observes that Aphrodite 'surrendered her chthonic role to other divine figures, to Persephone,' but remains associated with the Great Mother Goddess as 'goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of death' (SE12, 299).
6. Bachofen (1967) argues it is in the second stage the Goddess becomes associated with agriculture.
7. Henceforth, when capitalized, Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary refer specifically to Lacan's use of these terms in the tri-part schema of experience. I note here also that 'sexual difference' is not a term used by either Freud or Lacan, but developed in debates amongst feminists and psychoanalysts over the question of feminine identity (Evans 1996, 178).
8. For excellent clarity on Lacan's definition of the Real, see Themi (2014, 12–15).

## 2 Persephone in Heroine Television: The Post-feminist Impasse

1. See, for example, Andris and Frederick (2007), Hills (1999), McCaughey and King (2001), Tasker (1995; 2004).
2. Dan Quayle's reference to Murphy Brown's character is equally illustrative. As Dow notes (1996, 152–5), Quayle argued the erosion of family values in late twentieth century America was a consequence of feminism – typified in Murphy's decision to be a single mother. The creators of *Murphy Brown* responded with a scene in which Murphy watched Quayle's address on television.

3. Where Boucher argues Butler rejects 'scientific materialism for philosophical idealism' – foreclosing the Freudian unconscious (Boucher 2008, 127–62) – one might say, she forecloses the Real.
4. As Lacan observes, a psychotic structure does not necessarily present with manifest symptoms such as hallucinations, but an encounter with what is foreclosed in the Real can trigger these in later life (SI, 58–9).
5. As Maparyan observes (2012, 22), most college undergraduates are not *au fait* with Anglo-European 'high theory' debated by feminists in the academy, but have 'keenly developed theoretical sensibilities' as a consequence of 'living in' 'post-modern society.'
6. This is reminiscent of Denfeld's critique of the second wave where, she argues, feminists construct 'patriarchy' as an omnipresent oppressive force that, in reclaiming the 'goddess,' positions women as *innately* morally superior (1995, 155).
7. As with Greer, Whelehan (2000) identifies the treatment of women's breasts in popular culture as evidence that feminism has failed. Wolf's work on female orgasm (2012), avoids the 'false consciousness' critique, yet similarly suggests a more authentic female orgasm can be enjoyed by 'reclaiming the goddess' and her ancient wisdom – that is, by reimagining feminine anatomy and how it is interpreted in culture.
8. McRobbie implicates her own earlier studies on female cultures and consumption practices in this trend (2008, 535).
9. I depart from McRobbie's proposal that a new approach might deploy a model of women's desire as 'unruly and chaotic' (2008, 534), as this would repeat the 'woman as a method' analysis.
10. The baby hallucination recurs through seasons one to four, appearing on rollerblades, with a hunting spear (1.16 and 1.18), in a tuxedo, then as an angel with flowers, wings, and a bow-and-arrow, before transforming into a dragon when Ally tries to hit it (4.23).

## 3 Persephone as Narrative Symptom: Narrative Transactions in Long-form Viewership

1. Wright includes Jungian (archetypal or analytic) psychology in her study, though it differs from the models outlined here (1998), as Jung rejected Freud's libido as originating (exclusively) in erotic satisfactions of the drive.
2. Notably, Cowie's (1997) analysis of *Now Voyager* points to the Persephone myth as a representation of the conflicts of the Oedipal triangulation and as a means of circumventing the political censorship of the time to achieve this fantasy.
3. See 'Grey Matter,' http://www.greyswriters.com (accessed 1 August 2011). The effect of this collaborative space expedited the spin-off to *Grey's Anatomy – Private Practice* (2007–13) – that was born out of the popularity of the character Addison Montgomery (Kate Walsh) during her story arc on *Grey's Anatomy*.
4. In contrast to Ally, who leaves her urban work-family behind to pursue her daughter's happiness, Amy returns home with her daughter, moving in with her mother notably played by Tyne Daly, actress from iconic 1980s feminist detective series *Cagney & Lacey* (1981–8).

5. *La Femme Nikita* was derived from the French film by Luc Besson *Nikita* (1990), remade in America as *Point of No Return/The Assassin* (1993) by John Badham, and again, for television, in 2010, under the title *Nikita*.

## 4 Persephone as Epistemological Impasse: The Real Body of Sydney Bristow and 'The Woman Here Depicted'

1. *Alias* is a complex, dense, and intricate narrative, necessitating I impart a significant amount of plot detail where possible to show the richness of the animation of the Persephone plot within.
2. As Abrams notes (Stafford and Burnett 2004, 4), *Alias* was born from a plot frustration with his previous television project *Felicity* (1998–2002), the story of a college student whose life problems did not consistently produce enough drama to drive narrative. Abrams' solution was to recruit Felicity into the CIA, 'because then she'd have to go on these missions' and 'be in these incredibly high-stakes, life-and-death situations' but could never tell friends or family.
3. See 'Parity' (1.3), 'Full Disclosure' (3.11), and 'Resurrection' (3.22), for other examples.
4. See Kackman (2005) for a detailed analysis of the cold-war politics in *Alias*.
5. Jack was project manager of 'Project Christmas,' testing first grade children for essential spy attributes, training and recruiting them as sleeper agents. Irina's official KGB mission was to steal this program from Jack (see also, 'Full Disclosure' 3.11).
6. Here, Jack is dying and the cure is known only to Doctor Liddell (Michael McKean) – a scientist Jack helped into the witness protection program 25 years earlier. When, no longer lucid, Jack mistakes Sydney for Laura/Irina, APO ('Authorized Personnel Only' – the off-the-books division of the CIA Sydney and her father work within during later seasons) attempt to recreate the Bristow household as it was 25 years earlier. Sydney acts as Laura/Irina (a child actress playing Sydney), to encourage Jack to reveal Liddell's location and the cure.
7. See, also Crosby (2004), Hills (1999), and Tasker (1995, 1998) on this theme.
8. By contrast, several female characters are misrecognized as men based on reputation, such as Rachel ('The Shed' 5.3), Renee ('Out of the Box' 5.5), and Irina ('The Coup' 1.14 and 'Almost Thirty Years' 1.22).
9. See, 'All the Time in the World' (1.1), 'Color Blind' (1.7), 'Almost Thirty Years' (1.22), 'Breaking Point' (3.8), and 'Authorized Personnel Only, 2' (4.2).
10. Rambaldi's Renaissance origins and themes recall *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003).
11. Attempts to extract Sydney's 'authentic' identity as 'the woman here depicted' abound (see 'Truth Must be Told' 1.1, 'Colour Blind' 1.7, 'Almost Thirty Years' 1.22, and 'Breaking Point' 3.8). Her ova are harvested under the assumption she is The Chosen One ('The Telling' 2.22, 'The Two' 3.1, and 'Prelude' 3.7), and the intense brainwashing by the Covenant ('Full Disclosure' 3.11), like Irina's mental probing in 'S.O.S' (5.10), denotes psychic penetration.
12. An anxiety evident in *Dollhouse*, *Dark Angel*, the *Bionic Woman*, and *Drop Dead Diva*, where the heroine's body is at the centre of a crisis over her identity.

13. As 'the cruelest of the Derevko sisters' ('A Clean Conscience' 4.17), Yelena recalls Demeter's 'cruel famine' (line 311).
14. For Zinder (2007, 50), the dream connotes Sydney's transition into a Demeter figure, looking for her lost self (as Persephone).
15. See 'A Broken Heart' (1.4), 'Salvation' (2.6), 'The Frame' (3.17) and 'Mirage' (4.18).
16. Lacan argues Klein makes of the mother's body *das Ding*, the Freudian 'thing' of the drives (SVII, 106–7), and is critical of Klein's methods that project questionable meaning onto the symbolization of the child's play in analysis (SI, 68–70).
17. The season two opening sequence is a voiceover recap of the story thus far, ending with the statement 'the true loyalty of Irina Derevko remains unknown.'
18. See 'Double Agent' (2.14) for a similar dramatization of the spy marriage.
19. Irina's masquerade, as Jack observes, is unequalled: 'I know her charms. I know her tricks. The way she presents herself, she disarms you. Some people have that talent. Compared to all of them, Irina Derevko is *extraordinary*' ('Dead Drop' 2:4).
20. Sydney's toast to herself following her rebirth in 'Reunion' (3.3).

## 5 Persephone as Methodological Impasse: Feminine *Jouissance* in Veronica's 'Two Stories'

1. The Kanes, for example, pay Abel Koontz to confess to the murder of their daughter Lilly, to distract police from their flimsy alibis (Koontz agrees so his daughter will inherit the pay-off on his death). I note here, also, that while 'Hades' designates a person, as Room notes (1990, 145), over time it became synonymous with 'Hades' underworld.
2. Persephone themes pervade 'The Girl Next Door' (1.7), 'Silence of the Lamb' (1.11), 'Rat Saw God' (2.6), 'Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner' (2.7), 'Welcome Wagon' (3.1), 'My Big Fat Greek Rush Week' (3.2), 'Spit & Eggs' (3.9), and 'Papa's Cabin' (3.15).
3. 'Roofied' commonly refers to the use of Rohypnol (flunitrazepam), a prescription sedative that causes memory loss, as a date-rape-drug.
4. GHB is the popular acronym for gamma-hydroxybutyric acid, a prescription drug used to treat narcolepsy, insomnia, and depression, and a known date-rape-drug as it functions as an anaesthetic (Thanacoody 2007).
5. Reich identified the function of rape fantasies as being a form of negation that allows the repressed drive to form (1973, 254).
6. Suter only uses 'rape' to describe Homeric narrative patterns (2005, 50), but in all other instances refers to Korê's 'abduction' (rape is not in the index either).
7. As Suter further notes, Persephone never marries Hades in the religious, legal, or institutional sense but, rather, becomes his sexual partner or consort (2005, 90–8).
8. Though Butler's work forecloses further feminist engagement with psychoanalysis, other queer theorists have pursued psychoanalytic theory on issues of pleasure, such as Bersani (1986), Bersani and Phillips (2008), Dean (2000), and Dean and Lane (2001).

9. Feminist cultural criticism has not incorporated much queer engagement with psychoanalysis into their approach; equally, there is a general presumption that network television pitched at queer audiences, such as *The L Word*, does not reflect queer theory or political projects but restates heterosexual, if 'feminist,' norms (see Chambers 2006).
10. It is difficult to make many claims about Lilly's feminine *jouissance* – so tight is the censorious framing of sexuality in the series – so it is arguable whether Lilly's *jouissance* is phallic or non-phallic. Lacan's suggests 'feminine *jouissance*' is a pleasure tied to her 'not all' 'beyond the phallus' (SXX, 73), stemming from her relation to castration.
11. A debate reinvigorated by 'Title IX,' that mandates universities resolve sexual assault charges on campus irrespective of police involvement (Yoffe 2014).
12. In 'There's Got to Be a Morning After Pill' (3.12), Keith and Veronica pose as 'Carson and Nancy Drew' while undercover (see also, 'You Think You Know Somebody' 1.5).
13. See in particular Parry's (1997) and Caprio's (1992) descriptions of Nancy Drew.
14. Sarkeesian explicitly identifies the Lilith House feminists as an example of 'The Straw Feminist' (2011).
15. See 'M.A.D.' (1.20), 'A Trip to the Dentist' (1.21), 'Leave it to Beaver' (1.22), 'Weevil's Wobble but They Don't Go Down' (3.19), and 'The Bitch Is Back' (3.20).

## 6 Persephone as Historical Impasse: 'Confrontation and Accommodation' of the Post-feminist Heroine

1. Many critics argue the series is an unrealistic fantasy of identity-based political equality, as a blind casting method generated considerable race, gender, and ethnic diversity in the series (see Beail 2009, Kim in Mittell 2006a; Long 2011; Vaughn 2007).
2. See 'It's the End of the World (1)' (2.16) and 'As We Know It (2)' (2.17); 'Walk on Water' (3.15), 'Drowning on Dry Land' (3.16), and 'Some Kind of Miracle' (3.17); 'Sanctuary' (6.23) and 'Death and All His Friends' (6.24); and 'Flight' (8.24).
3. Meredith might thus depict Rowe Karlyn's 'unruly girl,' the post-feminist version of *The Unruly Woman* (Rowe 1995), who 'evokes the tradition of female unruliness' yet 'embodies the contradictions of postfeminism' (2011, 2).
4. As Halley puts it, 'taking a break from one hypothesis' – namely feminist episteme – creates the possibility of discovering 'others' (2008, 9).
5. Aspects of Meredith's Persephone complex carry through to current, on-air seasons (especially regarding motherhood and the discovery of another half-sister), and I comment on these where possible, but focus the analysis on seasons where the complex is first established and most productively worked through.
6. For example, the fact that Alison bit off her rapist's penis is treated with admiring humour ('The First Cut Is the Deepest' 1.2).
7. See, in particular, 'The First Cut Is the Deepest' (1.2), 'The Self Destruct Button' (1.7), 'Make Me Lose Control' (2.3), 'Into You Like a Train' (2.6),

'Owner of a Lonely Heart' (2.11), 'Time Has Come Today' (3.1), 'Sometimes a Fantasy' (3.3), 'Staring at the Sun' (3.8), 'Six Days (1)' (3.11), 'Drowning on Dry Land' (3.16), and 'No Good at Saying Goodbye (One More Chance)' (5.21).

8. This theme is also strong in *Samantha Who?* and aspects of *Gilmore Girls*.
9. The visual mirroring of Meredith and Ellis is also evident in 'No Man's Land' (1.4) and 'Don't Stand so Close to Me' (3.10).
10. Though not all feminist critiques of the next generation are unsympathetic – for example, Galman's instructions on the correct way to interpret and participate in girl culture (2012, 5) – the matraphor nevertheless strongly influences much of this engagement. Glickman (1993; see, also, Roiphe 1993), for instance, contrasts the 'authentic' feminism learnt from her mother with a false construction of feminism in the public sphere, echoing work on the Persephone myth as a fantasy of the 'good' feminist mother Demeter.
11. See also 'If/Then' (8.13), where a 'what if' version of Meredith's life (had her mother married Richard such that he became Meredith's step-father) is dramatized.
12. See *Dollhouse*, *Dark Angel*, and *Bionic Woman*, also on this theme.
13. One of these concerns eventuates when Derek is made interim Chief of Surgery and Meredith must play the role of 'the Chief's wife' attending official luncheons, where she is presented as 'Mrs. Shepherd' ('Valentine's Day Massacre' 6.14).

## Conclusion: The Persephone Complex

1. Starzecpyzel's work on the Persephone complex in lesbians (1987), suggests that those lesbians whose father or male relative has literally molested them, ultimately find it easier than lesbians who have not been molested to take a woman as object, because they have made the break with the first object (the mother) more clearly.
2. I would qualify here, that the history of America's colonization (where these narratives take place) suggests Judeo Christian values may be deeply embedded in the cultural psyche and play a significant unconscious role in the intellectual life of its citizens unique to other Western States.

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